The question of mother-tongue education in South Africa remains a vexed one. On the one hand, it seems reasonable and desirable that learners should be able to receive education in their mother tongue, if they so wish. On the other hand, there are some very real difficulties involved in the implementation of this ideal. The purpose of this paper is to clarify what these difficulties are, and then to suggest what needs to be done to overcome them. The intention is neither to argue for or against the notion of mother-tongue education in the South African context, nor to consider whether its implementation is practically possible, but simply to spell out what courses of action need to be undertaken if the idea is to be seriously pursued.

**Background**
The South African Constitution guarantees learners the right to receive education in the language of their choice[1]. Most current research suggests that learners entering school are able to learn best through their mother tongue, and that a second language (such as English) is more easily acquired if the learner already has a firm grasp of his/her home language. Furthermore, the poor throughput rates in South African schools at the moment, where barely a quarter of African language learners who enter the schooling system are likely to reach Matric[2], seems to indicate that the current practice of using English as the initial language of learning and teaching is at least one contributing factor to this problem.

For some years now, educationists have proposed that African language learners should be taught in their mother tongue for at least the first three years of school before switching over to English. More recently, the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, speaking at a Language Policy conference at the end of 2006, intimated that this initial period of mother-tongue instruction would be extended to six years, that is, both the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) and the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6). [This has been confirmed by her successor – Ed.]

If this proposal is to be taken seriously, there are a number of questions which need to be clarified and considered. The rest of this paper will be devoted to this task. These questions may be divided into four main headings, although, as will become evident, there is much overlap between them: language development, curriculum development, teacher education and school implementation.

**Language Development**

The nine official African languages are certainly able to function as media of communication at such levels as interpersonal conversation, narrative and cultural practice. As they currently exist, however, the standard written forms
of the languages have not yet been developed to the point where they are able to carry academic discourse effectively and therefore function as full-fledged languages of learning and teaching, even at the Foundation Phase. For the most part, they are based on particular rural dialects in conservative contexts, having been standardised in the nineteenth century by missionaries for such specific purposes as proselytisation, and later by the apartheid era Language Boards at least partly as a mechanism of social control. As such, these standard written forms remain in many ways archaic, limited and context-bound, and out of touch with the modern scientific world.[3] In addition, these standard forms are often quite different from the various dialects spoken by the actual language communities, even to the point in some cases of mutual incomprehensibility (see Schuring 1993; Herbert and Bailey 2002:59f). Nevertheless, it is axiomatic, as the Canadian linguist, William F. Mackey (1992:52), has pointed out, that ‘the lack of standardisation jeopardises the potential status of a language’ and that a language which lacks a well-established written form cannot become empowered.

If they are to be implemented as academic languages of learning and teaching, therefore, the standard written forms need to be modernised, regularised, codified and elaborated. This entails a number of large-scale projects: the revision of the spelling and orthography rules of the languages; the elimination of dialectal variation in the writing of the languages; the enlargement of their vocabulary, especially though not only in the fields of science and technology, together with the creation of modern dictionaries; and the codification of their grammars, based on the actual current practices of their speech communities, rather than on otiose cultural norms.

It is clear that this is a very large undertaking, which will require the provision of very large resources, both material and human. Of course, in theory it can be done, and the
example of Afrikaans in this country is often cited as evidence for this. It must be remembered, however, that the development of Afrikaans was made relatively easy by the fact that it emerged out of Dutch, an already fully functional scientific language; that enormous resources were made available through the National Party government; that it was fuelled by an intensely nationalistic political will; and that it was whole-heartedly supported by a community seeking exclusivity and autonomy from English. None of these conditions obtains in the case of the African languages in the present context, which makes the possibility of their development into academic languages far less certain. And it must be realised that all the investment put into the elaboration of Afrikaans would have to be increased at least ninefold if all of the official African languages are to be developed to the same degree.

It must be noted, furthermore, that the development of the indigenous languages into academic media of communication cannot be achieved merely through the endeavours of a few scholars working in isolation, however industrious and well-intentioned they may be. This technicist and artificial view of language development is plainly insufficient. Instead, what needs to occur is that the entire intellectual speech community of each language becomes actively involved in the development of the language as academic discourse by strenuously attempting to use the language to write scholarly articles, give formal lectures, present conference papers, produce textbooks and scientific manuals, and the numerous other activities which require a rigorous academic register. It is only when co-ordinated and systematic linguistic research is able to draw on, and feed back into, an actual, developing discourse of practice in a mutually enhancing relationship, that a language can begin to evolve into a functioning mode of academic and scientific expression.

After a period of some inertia, a number of projects have
recently been undertaken to develop the African languages by both the university sector and the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). These include the establishment of research centres at some universities, as well as the creation of new courses in translation and terminography. The nine African National Language Bodies (under the aegis of PanSALB) have initiated projects aimed at orthographic standardisation; lexicography and terminology development; and the promotion of literature in the indigenous languages (see, for example, Webb, Deumert and Lepota, 2005). It remains true, however, that progress has not been rapid and that a very great deal more needs to be done if the ideal of the African languages functioning fully as academic and scientific media of instruction in South Africa is to be actualised.

**Curriculum Development**

If the African languages are to be used as languages of learning and teaching in the classroom, the first and most obvious step that must be taken is to translate the Revised National Curriculum Statement (the RNCS) into these languages. At the moment, the only subject curricula which appear in the indigenous languages are the African languages as subjects themselves. The rest are available in English and Afrikaans only. It is plainly unjustifiable to propose that subjects be taught in the African languages when the RNCS – the very basis of all subject content and methodology – is not available to teachers in the putative languages of learning and teaching.

In the Outcomes Based Education system which South Africa has adopted, there are three Learning Areas in the Foundation Phase: Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills. The subjects making up the Literacy Learning Area – the eleven official languages as subjects – are obviously written in the particular languages themselves. But the Numeracy and Life Skills Learning Areas have not yet been written in the nine African languages. Now, for this translation to be conducted successfully, it is imperative to amplify and clarify the
subject-specific terminology in the African languages, as well as to develop their capacity for generic academic discourse. Thus, it is necessary to develop the African languages as academic and scientific languages, at least to a certain level, before the Foundation Phase curriculum can be translated, and, consequently, before one can expect teachers to begin teaching the curriculum in the learners’ mother tongues with any degree of consistency and precision.

In the Intermediate Phase, matters are rather more complex. Here, there are eight Learning Areas: Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Culture, Economic and Management Sciences, Life Orientation, and Technology. Moreover, within these Learning areas there may be one or more distinct subjects: for example, Natural Sciences comprises both Physical Science and Biology; Social Sciences includes both History and Geography. As is to be expected, the curriculum for these Learning Areas becomes increasingly detailed and specialised as the learner progresses through the various Grades. In consequence, the translation of the RNCS in this Phase can only proceed successfully if the African languages have been developed to a significantly higher degree as academic languages. And, at the risk of repetition, it is only once the RNCS has been translated that teachers will be able to begin teaching the various Learning Areas effectively in the African languages.

Naturally, it is not only the RNCS which must be available in the indigenous languages. All textbooks, readers, support material, teaching aids, guides and literature must be made readily accessible in these languages and kept continuously up to date. This is particularly important in the fields of mathematics, science and technology where an extensive range of new terms and phrases will have to be developed, learnt by the teachers and then communicated to the learners.

Apart from the translation of the RNCS and related learning and teaching materials, it is also essential that the
curricula for the African languages themselves be revisited and revised. The content structure and methodology for the teaching of the languages remains, like the languages themselves in many ways, rooted in an outmoded and ineffective pedagogic model which hampers learning and diminishes interest. As a result, many learners emerge from the schooling system unable to write their own mother tongue with any acceptable level of competence. Moreover, since they have often not been taught English (or Afrikaans) successfully, they find themselves unable to communicate effectively in their second language, in either oral or written mode. While they may have attained a certain level of basic interpersonal communicative competence, they lack what Jim Cummins (2000, for example) termed cognitive academic language proficiency, and thus they are unprepared for higher education or for training in a sophisticated work environment.

At this point, it is necessary to make a distinction between employing the African languages as authentic media of instruction throughout the curriculum and using the languages in the classroom in an informal, ad hoc manner in some or other form of code-switching. Given the diverse linguistic profiles of many South African classrooms, together with learners’ limited grasp of English, it is inevitable that teachers will resort to a mixture of languages for purposes of clarification and explication. In such contexts, code-switching is frequently a vital and indispensable pedagogical tool. Nevertheless, if the goal is to develop the African languages into genuine academic languages, and have teachers use them as such, then code-switching cannot be viewed as anything more than a partial and transitional support mechanism. This becomes ever more apparent as learners move into the Intermediate Phase and beyond, where increasing emphasis is placed on independent reading and writing skills. Learners who remain reliant on mixed-language modes of communication will find it extremely difficult to read texts written in the standard form of a particular language, as well
as to write essays and assignments and to answer tests and examinations. Furthermore, given the highly context-specific, personal and arbitrary nature of code-switching, it is impossible to construct generally comprehensible and enduring academic texts in a mixed-language format. Thus, while code-switching practices currently play an important role in many South African classroom environments, they can never be construed as constituting a target language of acquisition, or as representing a viable alternative to the development of formal academic proficiency in the standard form of a language.

It ought to be clear from the foregoing discussion just how much work needs to be done in order for teachers even to begin teaching the first six Grades of school in the indigenous languages. To suggest that such teaching could begin imminently, and to propose rapid policy changes to this effect, is both disingenuous and irresponsible.

Teacher Education

In addition to language and curriculum development, a crucial aspect of providing mother tongue education in South Africa lies in the field of teacher education (or teacher training as it used rather inelegantly to be termed). In the early years of this decade the responsibility for teacher education was transferred from the former colleges of education to the universities. During the same period, the numbers of students enrolling for African language courses at universities dwindled, for various reasons, to almost nothing. Even in Teacher Education programmes where an African language is a compulsory credit, the number of students who proceed with the study of an African language beyond the obligatory first level course is negligible. There is, as a result, a real crisis in African language teacher supply.

As a first step in addressing this crisis, it is essential that the government offer service contract bursaries for
student teachers specialising in African languages. In this scheme, students receive a full bursary (covering tuition, board and living expenses), but then have to pay the bursary back through a year of service for every year of study in which they received the bursary. Over the past few years, such bursaries have been offered for Maths and Science students only. In 2006, however, the Minister of Education announced that such bursaries would be extended to students specialising in Technology and Languages (both African languages and English). It is gratifying to note that this service-linked bursary scheme, which teacher education institutions have been demanding for some time, has begun to be implemented in 2007, through the Fundza Lushaka project (see Metcalfe 2007). It remains to be seen, however, whether sufficient numbers of student teachers will enrol for and graduate in African language courses, and then whether the Department of Education has the capacity to ensure that they do actually take up African language teaching posts in the schools.

Even this is not enough, however. Incentives must be provided for graduating teachers to accept employment in the rural areas and township schools where the need for teachers qualified to teach in the African students’ mother tongues is most needed. Such incentives could take the form of higher salary packages, performance bonuses and better promotional opportunities. If this does not happen, the current trend of successful black education graduates taking posts in private schools or government schools in the affluent suburban areas will continue.

Here it is necessary to remember that the issue is not merely that of teaching the African languages as subjects, but rather the ability to use the African languages as the media of instruction for the entire curriculum. For student teachers to be empowered to achieve this goal, a number of further steps need to be taken. Firstly, as with the African language school curriculum, the African language curriculum at tertiary level
needs to be drastically revised and modernised, so that students are enabled to study and learn these languages as effective carriers of academic discourse. Secondly, the entire Teacher Education curriculum (or at the very least the undergraduate Bachelor of Education programme) needs to be translated into each of the African languages. This would include all the official school subjects, but most especially Mathematics and the Sciences. As was noted in the first section of this paper, however, for this to be made possible the languages themselves need to be significantly developed. Thirdly, it will be necessary to provide a very large number of new Teacher Education lecturers who are able to teach the newly translated curriculum in the medium of the African languages. At the moment, a very small percentage of university teacher educators are able to provide quality tertiary tuition through the African students’ mother tongues, and even fewer in the scientific subjects. Finally, for the requisite development and continuous upgrading of mother-tongue tuition at tertiary level to be possible, it is necessary for high-level research to be conducted. Thus, optimally, each university’s Faculty or School of Education would need to attract and support top quality education researchers working specifically in the field of African languages in education, whether through research units, centres of excellence or individual fellowships, grants or professorial chairs.

In addition to the training of pre-service student teachers, it will also be necessary to upgrade the competence levels of teachers already in the system. Universities will have to provide a range of additional courses for in-service teachers so that they are able to acquire academic proficiency in the newly-developed African languages as well as enhanced methodological skills in utilising the languages as media of instruction in all the various Learning Areas. Such courses would, of necessity, need to be taught part-time (after hours, during the vacations, or as block-release programmes) which
would place an enormous burden on both the schools and the universities, and would again require a heavy investment on the part of the State in terms of additional lecturing staff, tuition and transportation costs, and perhaps even temporary teacher-replacements. Such courses would also by their very nature have to be completed over an extended period of time and would thus require a strong commitment on the part of both lecturers and teachers over and above the normal duties which they have to perform in an already highly pressurised work environment.

As was the case with language and curriculum development, it is evident that for all of this to become possible, the State will have to make extremely heavy investments in human and material resources far beyond the provision of the limited number of student bursaries it currently offers. Whether the State budget for education can or will ever be enlarged to meet all of these multiple costs remains unclear.

Implementation in the School

The fourth aspect of mother tongue education involves its actual implementation in the schools. Even assuming that at some point in the future the African languages have been effectively developed, that the curriculum has been efficiently translated, and that a full quota of properly trained teachers is available, there is still the question of whether schools will adopt the policy and implement it thoroughly. For this to take place, a number of stakeholders will have to be convinced of the broad benefits of mother-tongue education, not merely in a cognitive sense, but in a much larger socio-economic context. Such stakeholders include government education officials, school governing bodies, principals, teachers, and, most importantly, parents and learners. If learners and their parents do not actively desire mother-tongue instruction, then all the effort in the world will not make the policy viable. And for this desire to be inculcated, parents and their children will have to see that
mother-tongue education leads to palpable benefits in such spheres as economic empowerment, social mobility and influence, and pathways to further academic opportunities. All of this raises questions of the instrumental value of the African languages in South African society more generally which, though of interest and importance, lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

A more specific question related to mother-tongue education in schools concerns the role of English. No matter how rapidly or to what degree the African languages are developed, it is safe to assume that English will continue to occupy a role of crucial importance in South Africa for the foreseeable future. Even if the African languages are utilised as languages of learning and teaching in the first years of school, at some point there will have to be a switch to English as the medium of instruction, whether this takes place after three years, or, as is now proposed, after six years. Thus, English will have to receive systematic and sustained attention, and will have to be taught extremely effectively as a subject during the initial years of schooling so that when the transition does take place (be it gradually or immediately) learners will be sufficiently competent in the language to be able to cope with learning through it. Indeed, even if mother tongue education were one day to be employed right through to Matric level, learners would still need to be proficient in English for the purposes of higher education where, in a globalised academic environment, English is indispensable. At the moment, however, English is, in many cases, badly taught in South African schools. Just as important as the production of large numbers of competent mother-tongue teachers, therefore, is the development of high-quality teachers of English who can be deployed in the rural and township schools. Again, a system of service-linked contract bursaries and incentives to work in areas of greatest need must be implemented immediately for student teachers specialising in the teaching of English. The Minister of Education, as mentioned previously, has included
English in the list of priority subjects for student teachers, and this is to be welcomed as a long overdue practical measure. But, as in the case of African language teaching, steps must be taken, over and above this, to ensure the upgrading of in-service teachers in terms of academic proficiency in the language, content knowledge and improved methodological practice. It is a simple truism that any educational system which prioritises the African languages at the expense of English is destined to fail at the levels both of practical reality and educational theory. As even so avid a proponent of heritage languages as Tove Skutnabb-Kangas has observed, in multilingual societies it is essential that all learners are enabled to ‘learn enough of the power language to be able to influence the society or, especially, to acquire a common language with other subordinated groups, a shared medium of communication and analysis’ (1981:128).

In the best of all possible worlds, learners, especially in areas where English is rarely used, would begin their schooling in their mother tongue and then at some point switch over to English as the medium of instruction, having acquired enough English through subject study to be able to cope with it. At the same time, they would continue to study their home languages as subjects in a model of additive bilingualism. Conversely, in areas where English is able to be used as the language of learning and teaching from the outset, it is just as important that learners acquire proficiency in at least one official African language. In schools where Afrikaans is the medium of instruction, it is not unreasonable to require that in addition to their mother tongue, Afrikaans-speaking learners acquire both English (as they invariably wish to do anyway) and an African language.

From this it ought to be apparent that there can be no single language policy which would suit every school context in South Africa. The society simply remains too disparate and differentiated for any ‘one size fits all’ system to be
practicable or even desirable. What is not unfair to expect, however, is that by the time learners leave school they will all have full academic proficiency in at least one language (for the moment this would continue to be English or Afrikaans) as well as some degree of academic proficiency in one and perhaps two other official South African languages.

However, even within this ideal linguistic scenario, there are some possibly unexpected and certainly ironic implications. For schools seriously to implement initial mother-tongue instruction (followed later by English) means that schools would have to be divided into particular language groupings, and learners would have to attend a school offering their particular language. While this does happen informally to a certain degree, a formalised policy would in effect return South Africa (at least in the primary schools) to a kind of linguistic apartheid reminiscent of a former era. Even in the unlikely event of township schools being able to offer parallel-medium education in two or more African languages, there would still effectively exist a language apartheid between the various classes within the school. It is not clear whether the current proponents of mother-tongue education in this country have thought through these matters with sufficient care.

Finally, there remains the question of individual choice, and this brings the present discussion full circle. In any democracy parental (and learner) choice is paramount, especially when it comes to such issues as the language in which a child is to receive his or her education. It is no small matter that this right is enshrined in the Constitution. If, after all is said and done, parents continue to insist, as the majority currently does, that their children be educated in English rather than their mother tongue, then the onus rests on the State to ensure that this is provided as effectively as possible for everyone who wants it. And if this does indeed continue to be the will of the majority, then the
State must take far more active and extensive steps to improve the teaching and learning of English in South African schools than has hitherto been the case. No language in education policy which is forced on the majority against its will can ever succeed, and will serve only to perpetuate the unequal and inefficient conditions which currently exist in South African education.

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This right is, however, qualified by the consideration of reasonable practicability, which is defined in the Language in Education Policy of 1997 as occurring when 40 learners in a particular grade in a primary school, or 35 learners in a particular grade in a secondary school, demand to be taught in their mother tongue.

As a number of newspapers reported, of the number of learners who entered Grade 1 in 1994 only 21.9% wrote the 2005 Matric examination. Even taking into account such factors as the repetition of grades or learners leaving to study at FET Colleges, the percentage cannot be much higher than 25%.

To give but two lexical examples, there is no agreed equivalent in isiZulu for the word “hypothesis”, while in Sesotho one term is used for the quite distinct scientific notions of “force”, “power” and “energy”.

Colin Baker (2006:215f) provides a typology of bilingual education in which ten main models, each with multitudinous sub-varieties, are discussed. Which of these models would be best for any particular South African school is a complex matter, and is clearly best left to each specific School Governing Body to decide.

This is borne out by the FutureFact 2006 survey, which
reveals that, “apart from the Afrikaans community, between 60%-67% of all other language groups feel that English is the preferred language for education”. Indeed, of the remaining 33%-40% of the sample, less than 20% preferred mother tongue education (at whatever level); the remainder stating no preference. In addition to this, 82% of the sample claimed to be able to read and understand English, and, again apart from the Afrikaans community, between 72%-77% of all other language groups believe that English should be the main official language of South Africa.

ENGLISH IN SOUTH AFRICA – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD (1)

Education in English: an easy solution or the root of the problem in South Africa?

Dr Malcolm Venter, PhD English Linguistics
This year I have had the pleasure, as a retired English teacher and high school principal, of lecturing to the PGCE students at Stellenbosch University who are training to become English teachers. I set them an assignment entitled, ‘English in South Africa – a double-edged sword’. I was impressed by many of the assignments – at the insight and the passion and concern they showed at the plight of the thousands of learners who have to conduct their studies through a language which is not their Home Language. Considering that many of the students are Afrikaans-speaking whites, it is encouraging to know that our young people have a broader vision of education in this country than just their own back yards.

I have edited the assignments to a certain degree – clear errors have been removed; but I have tried to leave the flavour of young people, some of them not English-speaking.

Because the assignment was based on class discussions and mostly common sources, there are obvious similarities between the different assignments; but there are sufficient differences to warrant publishing five essays.

ENGLISH IN SOUTH AFRICA – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD (2)
According to the 2001 Census (Statistics South Africa, 2001:5), English is the home language of only 8.2% of South Africans. In a diverse country with 11 official languages, English acts as an important *lingua franca* in commerce both within the country as well as in international contacts. It follows that a solid knowledge of English opens definite social and economic doors for South African learners. Having one’s education in English will definitely give a learner ample time to become fluent in English. But is it really to the child’s advantage in the longer term? Does a fluency in English measure up to scientifically proven better cognitive development through home-language education?

For many people in South Africa, English has become the language that is used for the public impersonal domain, which can be seen as both a ‘concrete setting’ and ‘the general activity conventionally associated with the setting’ (Jeffery and Meshtrie, 2010:4). In this case, English is the language of economic activities, parliament, tertiary education, science and technology (The English Academy, 2009:1); it has become the language of status and economic power. Teaching English to African-language speakers, who form the biggest percentage of the lowest economic class, would thus be an important tool for economic growth.

**Parent’s wishes**

It is not surprising that many parents want to give their children a better chance by throwing them in at the deep end and wanting them to learn English in such a drastic way in
school by having their whole education through English, especially if the child is not in an environment laden with English stimuli. This has been one of the main arguments against home-language education in South Africa. According to Heugh (2000:20) there is, however, ‘no scientific evidence to support the myth that the majority of parents want straight for only English’ education. On the contrary, as early as 1993 studies showed that only 22% of African parents wanted their children to receive their education through English (Heugh, 2000:16). A more recent study done by the Pan South African Language Bureau (PANSALB) in 2000 shows that only 7.6% of parents thought ‘it is more important that learners learn in English than in other languages’.

One of the first things that had to change after 1994 was the education policy. Equal education needed to be given to all in the new democratic country. Following the negative connotations of mother-tongue education in Bantu Education, the enormous costs and time needed to translate the syllabuses and develop the African languages to academic standards and lastly, the pressure to change the education system as soon as possible, it was inevitable that English as a language of learning and teaching would be utilised as a quick and cost-effective solution.

Thus, even if parents want home language education for their children, it is available neither in the curriculum material, nor as a language to take matric examinations in. The state is thus acting unconstitutionally in not providing such material as, according to Section 6(2) of the Constitution it is supposed to ‘take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of [African languages]’ and also ‘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’ (Section 29(2) of the Constitution).

This language issue, coupled with other issues like HIV/AIDS,
poor support from home, low socio-economic circumstances, etc, has massive consequences for the youth of South Africa in the yearly decrease in the matric pass rate. By 2000 only 27% of learners who started school in Grade 1 finished with a matriculation certificate (Heugh, 2000:32). This relates to the argument posed by sociolinguists and applied linguists that cognitive development is negatively impacted by education through a language other than a child’s home language (Heugh, 2000:33 & The English Academy of South Africa, 2009:2,5).

In the Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (2003:11) it is emphasized that the learner’s ‘home language needs to be strengthened and developed so as to provide a sound foundation for learning additional languages’. This is confirmed by international scientific research which indicates that ‘children need at least 12 years [since birth] of learning their mother tongue’ (Heugh, 2000:29). This creates a basic knowledge of concepts, literacy and basic mathematic skills, something which has been at a worryingly low level the past few years. A sound foundation in home language strengthens the learner’s language with which he/she thinks and reasons, which can at a later stage be translated into English when their English competence is at a high enough level.

For this stage to be reached, ‘most pupils need 6-8 years of learning a second language before they can use it effectively as a medium of learning’ (Heugh, 2000:24). Where English is used as the language of learning and teaching, by the time that learners are competent enough in English to understand everything they are taught, they have missed the biggest part of the previous 6-8 years of education, which was supposed to have built a sound cognitive and content foundation on which to build further knowledge.

Something else that should be considered is the quality of English education which most African language learners receive due to the fact that their teachers would also be second-
language speakers of English. Second language speakers have a smaller vocabulary of English words at their disposal and have fewer words to express thoughts and concepts. Learners who have access to English only through the domain of the school will have fewer words to express their answers to questions in the matric exam than a second language learner receiving tuition from a home language English speaker. In practice, teachers would often be tempted to explain more difficult concepts (even in some cases all concepts) in the African language they share with their students so they can express themselves better and the learners can understand better. This deprives the learners of further vocabulary to express themselves in the matric exam as they can only write the matric exam in English or Afrikaans.

This does not mean that parents do not want their children to learn English; in the same study by the PANSALB in 2000, 42% of parents thought that ‘learners should have the opportunity to learn both their mother tongue and English equally well’ (Heugh, 2000:19). English is still, and will always be, a symbolic ‘gateway to a better life’ (Van der Walt, et al. 2009:18) in the multilingual context of South Africa.

Looking at English in this way, it could also be suggested that more elements of Black South African English be admitted into Standard South African English to enhance linguistic tolerance for people with an African language as their home language, but more importantly, to make English more accessible for African language speakers in terms of pronunciation and grammar structure. It is estimated that about half the English speakers in the world are second language speakers (Van der Walt et al., 2009:18-19), thus a perfect British or American grammar and pronunciation is no longer required. Focus should shift to making the language accessible and able to enhance intercultural and international communication.

In line with the fact that children need 12 years of mother-
tongue education and take 6-8 years to achieve Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in English, it can be suggested that mother-tongue education take place until the end of Grade 6 with English as an additional language ‘introduced as a subject in Grade 1’ (Department of Education, 2003:7). This will give learners a better opportunity to form a basis in their mother tongue. After this stage is complete, parents could be given the choice of the language of learning and teaching for their children in the GET and FET phases.

Being given a choice in GET and FET implies that there should be a choice of language for learning and teaching available. Currently the choice is between Afrikaans and English. The Education department needs to invest in the development of the African languages in South Africa and the translation of handbooks and study material. This can be done on a provincial level and could start with the biggest languages to make the implementation of such language development more practical and cost-effective.

An added option for the classroom could be the implementation of bilingual or multilingual education; using both the home language of the learner plus English in the classroom, making learners better equipped to handle academic material in English. This way the learners have the opportunity for optimum cognitive development coupled with a better competence in English in preparation for the public domain and English tertiary education. Multilingualism could furthermore enhance cognitive versatility. Implementation of multilingualism in schools would have to be decided upon by the governing bodies of schools according to the needs of the children in the school and the parents involved.

The purpose of Bantu education was the training of an uneducated mass of people for manual labour in South Africa. At the moment, with only 27% of learners starting school in South Africa being able to pass matric, of which only a small percentage have good enough marks to be admitted to
universities and colleges, it can be argued that the current education system is doing much the same as Bantu education years ago. Until there is an equal value put to every language in education in South Africa, there will never be equal education in South Africa.

Bibliography


ENGLISH IN SOUTH AFRICA – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD (3)

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Before commencing a discussion on the specific role English plays in South African schools, it might prove fruitful to briefly contemplate the linguistic landscape of the nation as a whole. South Africa hosts a melting pot of languages, most of which are endowed with official status by the South African Constitution. The Constitution recognizes a total of eleven
official languages, all of which must ‘enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably’ (SA Constitution, subsection 6, no. 4). This constitutional assertion often generates the impression that all official languages in South Africa also enjoy equal usage. Although this might be the case if ‘usage’ includes situations where languages are used as informal or private forms of communication, the reality is that in most formal contexts such as professional environments or sectors of commerce, the majority of languages fall into disuse, except for English. A similar situation to that in South Africa replicates itself on a global scale. Of all the major languages that are spoken in the world, none but English has truly international reach. This is because English has established itself as a ‘language of global communication that helps with access to jobs and advancement’ (Learn 2 teach, 17). English dominates in those spheres of public and professional life, both locally and internationally, that are indispensable for citizens of modern society. It is the functional value of English and the essential economic potential it offers that has made it presently such a major linguistic force and a continual object of desire.

Viewed against the backdrop sketched above, the role of schools in South Africa should be evident. It is the obligatory role of schools to produce learners that have sufficient command of English to function meaningfully within a society that is linguistically organized in and through the English language. Schools therefore play a functional role in that they have to produce functioning individuals. Further on in the discussion I hope to show that this ‘evident’ role assigned to schools might in fact not be so apparent. However, first I would like to reinforce the functional value of schools by introducing a theory of society as expounded by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. My reasons for employing Luhmann’s rendering of systems theory are twofold: on the one hand, it represents to my mind an accurate perspective on modern society in general, and on the other, it provides the
conceptual tools to analyze the functional role schools and communication play in particular.

Luhmann’s social systems theory provides us with an encompassing vision of society in which people participate in modern society, or what he refers to as a ‘functionally differentiated society’, entirely through means of communication. Today’s globalized society is founded upon a wide variety of communication systems, each with its unique way of functioning – hence Luhmann’s description of modern society as functionally differentiated (Moeller, 2006:4). The economic system, for example, functions on the basis of the distribution of money, whilst the political system functions on the basis of the distribution of power. By purchasing goods at your local supermarket you participate in the economic system and by registering your vote on a ballot you partake in the political system. In the technical language of systems theory one would say you are communicating economically or communicating politically. It is important to note that one has to adopt the already-in-place code of that specific system, by using money or voting, in order to communicate in it (2006:6). Apart from the specific code in which these systems communicate, they also communicate via a specific set of semantics. Although semantics is defined somewhat broadly within the context of Luhmann’s theory, it refers to the way in which society produces meaning or how it makes sense of things by producing discourse (2006:224). To further elucidate the notion of semantics I would like to relate it to the term ‘domain’, a term that had its origin in sociolinguistic circles. John Fishman coined the term domain in 1972 to refer to different contexts that characteristically necessitate the use of different languages or language types in a heterogeneous (linguistically and otherwise) society (Mesthrie, Jeffery 2007). Domains may include physical settings like the home, the classroom, a shop, and the media etc, but include more typically the ‘general activity’ (2007) that is traditionally associated with a particular setting. A
courtroom, for example, represents a domain in which Latin phrases associated with legal concepts are used frequently alongside English. Legal environments also call for a very ‘ceremonial’ and somewhat ‘condemnatory’ variety of language. Similar to the way in which domains influence the particular language or variety of language being used, the different systems in Luhmann’s society would determine the specific semantics being used. Domains or systems ought not to be conceptualized in terms of spatial dimensions as having a fixed structure with definite boundaries (Cilliers, 1998:4). They rather act as conceptual tools to render the linguistic functionality of society intelligible. Domains and systems often overlap and since they are interdependent they often influence one another reciprocally. Although in theory no permanent or rigid hierarchies are identified in society, certain patterns do establish themselves over time. Two obvious examples of powerful systems would be the mass media and the economic system.

The economic system is especially influential and has certain implications for how other systems function. One such system would be the educational system. Because these systems are ‘coupled’, the educational system has to adapt and feed the need of the dominating economic system. The semantics in which the economic system operates would in turn require of the educational system that it communicates by using the same semantics (2006:18). As was mentioned earlier, although in somewhat less technical language, English, both locally as well as globally, constitutes this set of semantics, and more specifically a very formal variant of English. Schools in South Africa cannot escape the reality that they form part of a functionalist society which demands that they produce English-speaking learners. It is important to note that within society as envisaged by Luhmann, humans have very limited agency (2006:79). Society and its different subsystems are autonomous and functionally so. If citizens cannot adopt the required semantics of a particular system, society would
simply shut them out, setting them on a slippery slope to intellectual poverty and ultimately to socio-economic poverty.

The latter is the state of affairs in South Africa and, sadly, it is due to external factors. This is the case because another systemic reality presents itself in South Africa. There are systems, domestic and private, that might not have such a significant outworking on the functioning of schools, but affect the greatest sections of the South African population. These are the cultures and communities that speak languages other than English. The government places a high premium on maintaining and nurturing the identity of these cultures and their associated languages. This has to be absolute priority, especially in a country such as South Africa that has a tragic and sensitive history pertaining to cultural intolerance. The importance of the appreciation of the multilingual reality in South Africa is reflected in the Constitution’s instruction that the state must take real measures to ‘elevate the status and advance the use’ of indigenous languages (SA Constitution, subsection 6, no.2).

Even so, the status and usage of indigenous languages are diminishing rapidly. A great number of learners trade their mother tongue for English as early as Grade R when they enter the General Education and Training (GET) band. This is due to the growing national awareness of the status of English as a gateway to economic advancement. Apart from the discouraging effect that this has on the growth of indigenous cultures, the choice to immerse learners completely in a language that is foreign to them at such an early stage has a negative effect on personal development as well. There seem to be consensus amongst academics that the best way to introduce and develop a second language is by doing so in conjunction with the development of the learner’s home language. A child’s cognitive abilities are developed in parallel to his linguistic abilities at a very juvenile phase of development. If an additional language has to be learnt is has to be done
so after a secure platform of linguistic capacity has already been established. In a lot of respects the Education Department of South Africa carries knowledge of this and has made provision, at least in theory, for the development of additional languages. The Additive Approach to Multilingualism policy as set out in The Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) requires that learners learn their home language and at least one additional language. The aim is that ‘learners become competent in their additional language, while their home language is maintained and developed’. Acquiring a third language (a Second Additional Language), which is usually an African Language, is even encouraged in order to promote cross-cultural dialogue. Both the Revised National Curriculum Statement as well as the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) state that all official languages can be offered on a Home Language level, First Additional Language level, and Second Additional Language level. According to these official statements, if the outcomes of learning a First Additional Language are met, a learner would be able to utilize this language as a medium of instruction. A learner would have acquired the basic skills of communication such as listening and reading, but will also be able to produce language through writing and speaking. These abilities form the elementary requirements that are compulsory for attaining Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Learn 2 Teach, 15). CALP differs from Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) in that the latter are sufficient for mere social interactions of a private or informal sort. CALP embodies the level of proficiency that is required if one were to use language in an academic context. In many ways CALP is also the prerequisite for functioning in society’s professional and economic spheres.

Categorizing languages in terms of Home Language and First Additional Language in South Africa is a misnomer in many circumstances. Numerous learners take English as their Home Language even though it may in actual fact be their First
Additional or even their Second Additional Language. For speakers of Northern Sotho, for example, Afrikaans is learnt as a First Additional Language and English as a Second Additional Language even though some of these learners receive instruction in English. This often causes the learners to neglect their mother tongue before it has reached the desired level of proficiency that is needed if an additional language is to be successfully acquired. The development of English as an additional language suffers as a result.

Some learners do opt to receive instruction in their mother tongue and take English as an additional language. This option proves successful in many Afrikaans-medium schools. In these cases Afrikaans is formally developed right through the Further Education and Training (FET) band, and more importantly this is done so together with English. These learners normally don’t experience severe problems when the switch to English as a medium of instruction is made at tertiary level. In the majority of South African schools, however, this luxury isn’t on offer. Many so-called black schools do present English as a First Additional Language, whilst instructing in the home language of the learners, but because of indifferent bureaucratic support and a lack of resources, human and otherwise, they do not reach the desired outcomes (Young, 1995:107).

The role of English in South Africa is indeed precarious. In this discussion I have attempted to show that two confronting linguistic realities present themselves in South Africa. On the one hand, English represents an indispensable language of economic betterment, and on the other, precisely because of its indispensability, it threatens to consume South Africa’s less essential indigenous languages. I have also tried to show that in so many cases an attempt to bridge this disjunction ends in failure. Many black non-English speaking learners who prefer to receive instruction in their mother tongue are left linguistically incompetent to enter the global market which
operates chiefly in English. Other black non-English speaking learners enter schools in which English is the medium of instruction with the hope of attaining a better future. But without the critical development of their mother tongue their development of English fails even more so. From the perspective of Luhmann’s social systems theory, theoretical attempts to transcend this tension by formulating a language policy in South Africa by regulating use of languages in terms of ‘domains’ seem to miss the point. According to the Preamble of the English Academy of Southern Africa the term ‘domain’ is ‘helpful in recognizing that certain languages can predominate in certain specific areas of use’, without the existence of other domains (such as domestic domains where indigenous cultures still flourish) ‘being denied or resented.’ This statement is also an attempt to bypass the tension inherent to the constitutional assertion that all official languages should enjoy equal status, but this seemingly effortless and passive instruction, however, does not seem feasible if one takes into account the central economic system that is actively and increasingly becoming a totalizing system that consumes and shapes society after itself. Although the role of English might resemble a double-edged sword and even though it needs to be handled with care, it is critical that it is indeed being handled. Active intervention from the Government and the Department of Education is crucial if the indigenous languages are to survive.

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**ENGLISH IN SOUTH AFRICA – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD (4)**

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The South African constitution states that all eleven official languages must ‘enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably’. Equity refers to fairness and impartiality, and the English Academy of South Africa has a very valid point
that this is not the same as calling for equal use (Venter Handout p. 1). In reality, English is still the most widely-used language across the nation, and is the language of parliament and general administration. The reason for this is that English is a global language, enabling communication across the country’s borders. Even within South African borders it is also the most probable common language between citizens of different cultures and backgrounds.

The problem with this situation is, however, that English holds a possible threat to the ten other official languages of the country. Even though educating the country’s youth in English holds obvious benefits, like having more than enough learning resources and also being the global language of academic communication, it also creates the threat to their own mother tongues, and the culture and identities that go with them, diminishing and eventually disappearing altogether. The other problem that it creates is the issue of these learners having to conceptualize everything they are learning in their second language, leading to very low academic results because they, quite simply, do not understand the subject content in a language that they are not proficient in.

The only way to deal with this situation would be to recognise the advantages and disadvantages of educating in English at school level, because the question is not whether education should be in English, but how these disadvantages are going to be managed and minimised. There is no use educating in the mother tongue only and then having a generation of matriculants who cannot further their studies except in that language. They will then not be able to function academically outside the borders of this country, as English ‘has come to be seen as a language of global communication that helps with access to jobs and advancement’ (van der Walt et al, 17). These children will thus have completed their education with high marks and will have nowhere to go afterwards.

The first step in managing the disadvantages of educating in
English is to recognise the phenomenon of linguistic domains and that every language does indeed have a place in the society where it belongs. A language does not have to fall into disuse simply because it is not used as the primary language of education, which is only one of many linguistic domains. Jeffery and Mesthrie (English Academy website) conceptualise this idea as ‘domain specialization’, where every language – and even each variety of the same language – has a specific place in the mother-tongue speaker’s life. This means that even though the learner is, for example, receiving his education in English, he is still speaking isiZulu at home with different varieties and registers to his friends and family, ensuring that he stays in touch with his cultural identity and that his mother tongue does not fall into disuse.

The key to managing the other disadvantages of learners receiving their education in English is to help them from the earliest stages of their education to become proficient in English as a second language and then make the switch to English when they are competent enough in the language to do so. That is why I strongly agree with The English Academy of South Africa’s view that learners should receive instruction in their mother tongue and then switch to English later in their GET phase to be able to complete their FET phase in English. Receiving their first years of education in their mother tongue will also ensure that the foundation of their L1 is strong enough to enable the successful acquisition of a L2, in this case English, as according to the Revised National Curriculum Statement, ‘Learners are able to transfer the literacies they have acquired in their home language to their first additional language’ (Venter handout, p. 7). This is what one writer describes as ‘common underlying proficiency’ as opposed to ‘separate underlying proficiency’.

There are, however, arguments against this proposed solution to the problem.

Firstly, the quality of both mother-tongue education and
education in L2 English is still too far below the necessary standards to even hope that learners will be able to make the switch and achieve good marks at the end of their FET phase. Even if parents agree with the aforementioned programme and believe that it is sound in theory, what they will see in practice is very different – inadequate education in both the L1 and L2 of their children, an unsuccessful switch to English later on and, ultimately, unsatisfactory marks in matric.

Secondly, many parents are choosing to have their children receive their education in English from the start of their schooling for a number of reasons which include, among others, the social status of English in South Africa, beliefs that it will provide them with more opportunities and the higher quality of English schools as opposed to the so-called black schools.

Another factor contributing to the complicated nature of this matter is that it is a very emotional affair. Language is such a big part of a person’s identity and culture, that any matter relating to the possible diminishing of one’s own language is bound to invite strong feelings and different opinions. An example of one such opinion is that, although many parents choose to have their children educated in English, other parents may, for whatever reason they see fit, insist on mother-tongue education all the way through to Grade 12 as a part of their children’s constitutional rights. Their argument is that their children should not have to be educated in English as a Home Language when English is not even spoken at their homes. But as Jonathan Schrire states in a letter to the Cape Times: ‘Sooner or later our children are going to hit the indigenous language ‘wall’ and need to learn English. The earlier they start, the easier the process will be for them.’

The topic requires more consideration before a clearcut solution can be reached. It will also be necessary to define the goals that government is trying to reach more clearly. Is government’s priority to address the low pass rates of matric
students, to promote what Jeffrey and Mesthrie refer to as the ‘appreciation and preservation of indigenous knowledge’ or to offer students a wider range of choice and further learning opportunities after passing their National Senior Certificates? Or is it all three and perhaps even more?

It is also important to re-establish English as a tool or a resource and not as the threat that it currently symbolises for many people. Only then can it be used by South African citizens to further themselves in their education and training and place them on the global map.

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**ENGLISH IN SOUTH AFRICA – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD (5)**

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Graham Bam puts the main problem plain and simply in a letter
to the *Cape Times*:

*The debate about the use of English as a medium of instruction is going nowhere.*

No more research, theories or proposals. We are running out of time. We have to make a decision. Yes, Jonathan Schrire (in a letter to the *Cape Times*) is right when he says that ‘this is an important education debate which has serious consequences if we get it wrong’. We know the pressure is on, but we have to choose a policy regarding languages in our schools and start implementing it without looking back. It’s time to go back to basic decision-making and look at all the positive consequences and all the negative consequences of the different options. Although decision-making of this magnitude is never that simple, wasting more time on this debate is only causing more harm, making the decision harder and the ramifications more serious.

As I see it, at the moment we have two major proposals each with its own fan base. First, we have the people who want English to be our medium of instruction in all of our schools. On the other hand we have the people supporting home language (or mother-tongue education). Last but not least, as with all decision-making, there are those few individuals that are voting for both, always looking for a midway, the best of both worlds.

The beautiful irony of this debate is that the supporters of both English-medium and the mother-tongue supporters feel that their course of action or proposal is crucial for our country’s academic, economic, politic and social survival.

For the English-medium followers it is obviously better to have English as the medium of education in our schools to give our learners the necessary English proficiency to be able to get educated at tertiary level and to go even further and compete academically on international level. This argument
makes sense since English is a global language and all the necessary academic books and articles are available in English. However, the mother-tongue supporters’ argument is just as valid. According to them and recent research, there is definitely a relationship between language and the cognitive development of children. In simple terms, this means that anyone that is not English will be disadvantaged if they do not receive education in their home language because concepts would be much harder for these children to grasp than for a person who home language is English. This is just not fair and is especially worrying since only a small portion of South African citizens are actually English-speaking.

According to the English-medium, group it would be beneficial for the country’s economy to have English as our schools medium of instruction. This means there will be no need to train teachers to be efficient in any of the country’s other official languages; it means there is no need for new translated textbooks. The mother-tongue group feels differently. They believe that it would be financially bad for our country to get so many teachers educated in English because not only do the teachers need to be capable of teaching second- or third-language learners but all teachers would also need to be English proficient, even the maths and science teachers, to help the second- or third-language learners to understand the subject specific languages and the content in order to fully grasp the different concepts.

The mother-tongue advocates argue that it would be without doubt politically incorrect to make English the medium of instruction. They feel this way because it is in direct contradiction to our country’s law that says that all eleven languages in South Africa are officially equal in status, therefore they must also be equal in practice. Their opponents say that it would only complicate our political interactions locally and internationally if we isolate ourselves by all communicating in different languages.
The first-language education group do not want to lose the uniqueness of our country and this is a possibility if home language is not taught in schools because without teachers’ positive promotion of home languages in school they would eventually not be spoken any more and the culture and traditions they represent would get lost; and that would lead to losing the diversity which makes our country unique. On the other hand, the mother-tongue approach would make communication so much easier in the long run and might even create unity in the future.

Yes, these are all valid arguments on both sides, but this essay is not to make a decision or to convince you which approach is better and why, but rather to give a wake-up call to all, especially those focusing on the harmful consequences of each approach, to rather look at all the negative consequences of the time we are busy wasting on this debate. I am not saying it’s an easy decision to be made by any means, but it is necessary every once and a while to look at what damage the debate and the time spent on this debate is doing to our country, our schools and most importantly our children.

English is one of the major global languages. English also happens to be the only major language to be found in the eleven official languages in South Africa. Therefore it makes sense that English has become South Africa’s lingua franca because of its usefulness internationally. This, however, has positive and negative consequences for our country. On the one hand, it is undeniably positive because it enhances our international or global communication ability. On the other hand, it also poses a possible threat of our neglecting our other ten official languages and their associated cultures and traditions.

English, in becoming the South Africa’s lingua franca, poses the same threats as English becoming a world-wide common language, since our country’s rich diversity could be damaged by neglecting our other ten official languages. It is because
of this negative consequence that all ten official languages in South Africa are regarded as equal in status to English. This, however, is only true in theory. Although all of our ten languages might be considered according to law as being equal, the dominant language still remains English although it is only the home language of a small portion of South Africans.

This spills over to education. It is well known that English is internationally the most predominant and significant academic language. This is seen in the fact that the majority of books in our libraries are in English. This academic value that English brings with it puts pressure on tertiary education institutions to use English. This again then has a ripple effect: Our school education needs to be in English so that the learners can be competent enough in English to succeed academically at Universities and other tertiary level education.

Therefore English in schools is something that needs a lot of consideration. If the relationship, shown by research, between mother-tongue instruction and cognitive development is taken seriously it is obvious that being taught English when it is not your home language, which is the case in most of our schools today, causes a problem of inequality between learners with different home languages. Research has shown that it is more beneficial for a learner with a mother tongue other than English to switch to a programme of instruction in English at a later stage after their mother tongue has been fully developed. This, however, is more easily said than done. English, and the empowerment it brings with it, forces learners to join a programme of instruction in English at a much earlier stage than is best for their cognitive development. The other reason for this premature switch to English for English second-language learners is the fact that some domains or schools do not provide any form of education in their mother-tongue. One of the many suggestions being
made by many groups such as, among others, the English Academy of Southern Africa is that, although a longer period of mother-tongue instruction is recommended for better cognitive development, it is also important that these home languages (if not English) ‘should be accompanied by a carefully worked out programme of instruction in English as a language subject that will enable the switch to English as language of learning to be easier’. The English Academy of South Africa also lays a lot of emphasis on ‘English across the curriculum’ where all the subjects are involved in the teaching of English and not just the English language period. One of the main concerns is the decline in the number of teachers qualifying to teach home languages other than English. Provision has to be made for these learners that do not speak English as their mother tongue.

All this emphasis on second-language education poses another threat: this time it is the possibility of neglecting English first-language learners in order to help English second-language learners come to terms with English. These are common problems in multilingual societies.

Therefore it is important to find a balance between the short- and long-term advantages of home-language education along with English second-language education. Yes, there are going to be some short term disadvantages because of the lack of adequate textbooks and competent teachers in indigenous languages, but being educated in their home language will help learners with their cognitive development and help to form a linguistic basis on which English as a second language can be built. Our first priority should be to get the necessary textbooks and teachers in all the eleven languages and create a programme that focuses specifically on English as a second language without neglecting English as a first language. Yes, this still leaves English as the dominant language in South Africa, but let us try to forget about the negative associations of the past and focus on the future of our learners and what is
Greater attention to language education in multilingual schooling is vital if we are to achieve national unity and social reconciliation through the removal of legacies of linguistic inequalities and prejudices that underpinned the racism of our past (Young, cited in Heugh, Siegrühn & Plüddemann 1995: 111).

Owing to the notion that language education in South Africa is reliant on the country’s multilingual and multicultural context, it is imperative to position language as a cultural phenomenon. Viewed from this perspective, it is necessary to think in terms of Michel Foucault’s ‘critical ontology of ourselves’ which, according to Lize Van Robbroeck, ultimately points towards ‘... exploring the boundaries and underpinnings of current and historical discourses with the tentative
intention of proposing possible ways of going beyond those limits’ (2006: 16).[1] It is through this analytical conceptualisation of ‘ourselves’ – all members of the so-called ‘rainbow nation culture’ – through which multilingual language policy and its confluence with educational and didactic institutions in South Africa should be discussed. On the whole, this essay refers to the position of the English language in South African schools and its dissemination within the post-apartheid milieu. Furthermore, this essay includes a brief historical account of English in South Africa, its status as ‘official’, and how the former apartheid era’s language policy proved extraneous to current language strategies.

According to the *Encyclopaedia of Nationalism Volume II*, ‘Language is a crucial element of culture because it is part of it at the same time that it is endowed with the ability of naming it’ (Motyl 2001:282). Apart from history, religion, rituals and numerous other ‘nation-building blocks’, language is a primary socio-cultural unit in the process of national construction.[2] A nation’s identity resides in the preconceived notion that language is a defining characteristic of nationality (Fishman 1972: 3). The concepts of linguistics and national identity are notably ‘equal forces’, as language plays an essential role in the process of evoking nationalist fervour. The collusion of language and nationalism creates ‘… powerful and often pathological allegiances to a cultural ideal’ (Boswell & Evans 1999: 1).[3] Multilingualism is the new cultural ‘exhalation’ of South African language policy. In order to understand the position of English within South African nation building, various social and historical ‘fixtures’ of the language need to be considered.

One should note that, through British colonial expansion in South Africa, English achieved ‘high status’ as it was declared the ‘… sole official language of the Cape Colony in 1822’ (Gough 1996: 3).[4] In the Colony, English was initially
used for the advancement of religious instruction by introducing the Anglican faith to so-called ‘natives’ and settlers. Numerous English-Anglican mission schools such as St Cyprians at the foothills of Table Mountain were founded by Bishop Robert Gray, the first Anglican Bishop of Cape Town in 1871 ([http://www.stcyprians.co.za/?m=2&s=1](http://www.stcyprians.co.za/?m=2&s=1)). Furthermore, the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 ascribed English with national status along with Dutch as official languages.[5] [6] This language policy continued throughout the epoch of the Afrikaner nationalist regime until its eradication in 1994.

During the height of Afrikaner nationalism, language-in-education policy mirrored apartheid ideology in general (Barkhuizen & Gough 1996: 453). The South African school system incorporated a segregation scheme which was not only based on ethnicity, but also language usage. According to Barkhuizen and Gough, white children were instructed exclusively in either English or Afrikaans, while black learners were expected to be instructed in both of the official white languages including an African language (Barkhuizen & Gough 1996: 454).[7] [8] Within this scheme, colonial languages such as English were endorsed with ‘power’ by being sanctioned as the only means to education and societal access. Black languages were merely categorised as languages of everyday interaction and solidarity within ‘native’ communities (Barkhuizen & Gough 1996: 453).

Ultimately, the social deficiencies caused by apartheid education among black learners led to the decline of indigenous African languages. Barkhuizen and Gough state that black educators received insufficient training for such a language policy and to instruct in both English and Afrikaans became problematic (Barkhuizen & Gough 1996: 454). Furthermore, black schools received little funding for educational resources in order to support this policy. These afflictions imposed upon African languages caused political
and incremental ripple effects which reverberate in post-apartheid South Africa.

The former racist notion of demarcating languages is irrelevant to South Africa’s continuous transition into egalitarianism. The reconstruction and repositioning of national consciousness affirm the ideological disposition of the ‘new’ South Africa as a ‘rainbow nation’. Consequently, educational language policy was reorganised to meet the social needs of multilingualism and linguistic equity.[9] According to the South African constitution, the aim of education is to take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of all the eleven official languages of the Republic (http://www.southafrica.info/about/democracy/constitution.htm). [10] Within this officially recognised ideal, the place of English amongst these official languages needs to be investigated.

An obvious statement would be that all other South African ‘mother-tongue’ languages are not English. Similarly, varieties of English used by white, black and coloured South Africans differ from so-called ‘standard’ British and American English usage and are continuously regarded as either acceptable or substandard by numerous South African academic circles.[11] According to Lanham, there are at least five native and non-native varieties of South African English (cited in Van Der Walt 1998: 43).[12] Also, English is expanding globally, constituting an opportunity for enhanced communication by being the most significant international academic language (The English Academy of South Africa 2009: 1). These notions, combined with the historical traces of English in South Africa, create the palimpsest whereupon English is currently positioned[13]. These conceptions could indirectly undermine the constitutional ideal of language ‘even-handedness’ and add to the former perception that English is ‘superior’ to other languages. The position of
English in South African schooling and beyond becomes a discursive paradigm.

According to The English Academy of Southern Africa, numerous challenges for the English language are presented by our multilingual situation (2009: 1). One could argue that English in South African education has become a ‘double-edged sword’ seeking balance between socio-political language justness and the evident global augmentation of English as an international communicative medium. On the one hand, the language has global appeal, whilst on the other, it could possibly be hazardous to other languages and their connected cultures (English Academy 2009: 1). As a useful, world-wide common language, the ‘boundary-hopping’ nature of English is gradually acquiring linguistic dominance which may be resented by its users. This situation pertains to South Africa, where English is the relative lingua franca or ‘linking language’ used for wider communication (Dirven, cited in Van Der Walt, Evans & Kilfoil 2009: 7).[14] The English Academy of Southern Africa declares:

… while English nominally enjoys equal status with ten other languages, it is patently indispensable in many spheres of national life, and citizens lacking it may find themselves disempowered in certain linguistic domains (2009: 1).

It is vital for educators in South African schools to be responsive to wider economic and socio-linguistic matters within their curriculums. Ian Moll refers to the concept of ‘curriculum responsiveness’ which ultimately suggests a positively formulated ‘benchmark’ against which ‘… we might be able to judge whether our education programmes are meeting the needs of a transforming society’ (cited in Griesel 2004: 1). These responses regarding English education (concerning second-, third- and mother-tongue language users) should provide a platform on which the usefulness of English as a world language is built, whilst affirming the significance of ‘native’ languages. English language learners need to be aware that one language is not superior, or more sophisticated, than
another. Therefore, language must be repositioned as not only being a uniquely cultural phenomenon, but also as ‘... a tool, and the only criterion it needs to meet is that it serves the needs of its speakers’ (Van Der Walt, Evans & Kilfoil 2009: 17).

The Revised National Curriculum Statement suggests an ‘additive approach’ to multilingualism in South African schools. This approach provides a policy whereby school governing bodies are responsible for selecting school language policies that are ‘... appropriate to their circumstances and in line with the policy of additive multilingualism’ (http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=70257). Here, learners are encouraged to learn their home language and become competent in an additional official language. A second additional language may be learnt by choice. The notion is that, if learners become proficient in their home language as it develops and matures, this will build a literacy which could be transferred to their additional languages. In other words, if the additional language is English and the home language is isiXhosa, isiXhosa will form the ‘literacy base’ whereupon English could be developed.

I agree with this approach to proficiency in the mother tongue as an accelerator for learning other languages. However, this approach does not stress the distinct usefulness of English. Schools in certain domains and regions could potentially exclude English from their curriculum. School governing bodies selecting language policies should be aware of the role of English in local and global society and not undermine its communicative role as an international lingua franca. Schools should also be aware that ‘non-English’ home language as a medium of instruction in all school subjects could become problematic as there are not enough resources published in African languages. Some critics state that mother-tongue education should be diminished and English should be implemented as the official language of instruction through
total immersion in the language. Otherwise

... we would end up with a country which produces no internationally recognised engineers, doctors, scientists, technologists or mathematicians. That would finally bring down the curtain on this country (Schrire, *The Cape Times* 2010: 9).

The socially-discordant effect of such direct methodologies undermines the new South African ideal of producing a nation whose identity is founded on tolerance. English should not contribute to monolingualism in the classroom and in turn breed ‘ethnolinguistic intolerance – racism in another guise’ (Young, cited in Heugh, Siegrühn & Plüddemann 1995: 108, 109). The English language should be freed into the open eclecticism of a multilingual South Africa.

Bibliography:


Schrire, J. 20 January 2010. ‘English is Crucial’ (Letter to the editor). *Cape Times*.


The philosophies of Michel Foucault refer to ‘constructionism’, which is concerned with how public knowledge in disciplines such as history or language is constructed (Woolfolk 2010: 312). Furthermore, constructionists such as Foucault are interested in how so-called ‘common-sense’ ideas, everyday beliefs and commonly held understandings about people and the world are communicated to members of socio-cultural groups (2010: 312).

It is important to recognise nationalism as a social ‘construct’ where members of a nation ascribe nationalist meaning and attach particular value to cultural ideals such as history, language and religion. According to Ernest Gellner, “Nationalism is not the awakening of a nation to consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (cited in Anderson 1983: 15).

To justify the claims above, one could refer to Afrikaner nationalism and how it was preoccupied with the Afrikaans language being a “spiritual exhalation of the [Afrikaner] nation” (Fishman 1972: 49). According to J.G. Von Herder, the Afrikaner felt that “… language ought to be worshiped and preserved from foreign contamination” (cited in Motyl 2001:
Evidently, Afrikaner nationalists felt threatened by ‘the other’ languages in South Africa. By and large, Afrikaans as a ‘high status’ language had to be ‘sealed’ from the infiltration of English and other South African languages. According to Neville Alexander, the former apartheid regime’s National Party (Christian National Education) policy, instigated that various non-Afrikaans ‘language clusters’ and ‘sub-groups’ were to be “systematically kept separate” (Alexander 1997: 2). Deduced from this perception of how language becomes ‘symbolically’ synonymous with a specific group of people, it may be assumed that various groups would ascribe noteworthy status to ‘their’ language as predominant to other languages.

[4] The roots of South African English extend before formal British colonisation and the occupation of the Cape in 1795. Various encounters between native inhabitants of southern Africa with English people, including English sailors, explorers and traders, assisted in English being transplanted into Africa (Gough 1996: 2). Subsequent to Britain’s initial occupation of the Cape Colony, numerous British immigrants from various social classes in Britain settled along the Eastern Cape frontier (Gough 1996: 2). Here, a colonial ‘melting pot’ fused various English dialects and produced new linguistic systems and varieties.

[5] This Union, united the former Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State with the Cape and Natal colonies (Gough 1996: 2)

[6] Dutch was later replaced by Afrikaans in 1925 (Gough 1996: 2).

[7] “The fact that English speakers had to attend English schools, and Afrikaners, Afrikaans schools created a division within the privileged White group itself” (Barkhuizen & Gough 1996: 454).
“Integral to the motivation of this policy appeared to be the perspective that Blacks had to function as effective servants of the White state and therefore had to be competent in both official ‘White’ languages” (Barkhuizen & Gough 1996: 454).

“Apartheid language policy infused with unequal language proficiency demands for school pupils in the country was replaced in 1997 with a new policy based on non-discriminatory language use and the internationally accepted principle of mother tongue education in the context of a bilingual or multilingual framework” (Heugh 2000: 3).

The eleven official languages of the new South Africa are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu (http://www.southafrica.info/about/democracy/constitution.htm).

“[D]uring the 18th and 19th century’s publishers and educationalists defined a set of grammatical and lexical features which they regarded as correct, and the variety characterized by these features later came to be known as Standard English. Since English had, by the 19th century, two centers, Standard English came to exist in two varieties: British and US. These were widely different in pronunciation, very close in grammar, and characterized by small but noticeable differences in spelling and vocabulary. There were thus two more or less equally valid varieties of Standard English-British Standard and US Standard. . . .” (Melchers and Shaw, cited in Nordquist 2010: 1)

Christa Van Der Walt suggests a “…multistandard approach or restandardization”, which implies an official recognition of South African varieties of English (1998: 43).

The word ‘palimpsest’ comes from Latin and Greek meaning ‘to scrape clean and use again’. A palimpsest could literally refer to the slabs or tablets whereupon learners in western
schools used to write on, placed on their laps. However, these tablets could never be thoroughly scraped clean as white chalk would leave faint traces of former writings behind. Therefore, the learners would write ‘new knowledge’ directly onto ‘old knowledge’. In this essay, I use the term palimpsest symbolically as the traces of so-called ‘old knowledge’ from South Africa’s colonial and racist past continually emerge from beneath new South African ideology.

[14] Dirven declares that English as a South African lingua franca is relative due to the fact that in a specific domain or area in the country, another language may be more commonly used for communication (cited in Van Der Walt, Evans & Kilfoil 2009: 7). However, one must recognise that English is “…irreplaceable in a range of other domains, including Parliament and general administration at higher levels” (The English Academy of South Africa 2009: 1).


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**THE CLASSIC CONCORDANCE OF CACOGRAPHIC CHAOS**

**The strange case of the English language**

Below is one of the versions of a poem entitled ‘English is tough stuff’ (aka ‘The Chaos’) by Dr Gerald Nolst Trenité (1870-1946), a Dutch writer, traveller and teacher. It was first published in 1920 in a book to help people improve their English pronunciation (*Drop Your Foreign Accent*).
It has been said that English is one of the hardest languages to learn to speak and spell correctly. ‘The Chaos’ represents a virtuoso feat of composition, a mammoth catalogue of about 800 of the most notorious irregularities of traditional English orthography, skilfully versified (if with a few awkward lines) into couplets with alternating feminine and masculine rhymes. The selection of examples now appears somewhat dated, as do a few of their pronunciations; indeed a few words may even be unknown to today’s readers (how many will know what a ‘studding-sail’ is, or that its nautical pronunciation is ‘stunsail’?), and not every rhyme will immediately ‘click’ (‘grits’ for ‘groats’?); but the overwhelming bulk of the poem represents as valid an indictment of the chaos of English spelling as it ever did. Who the ‘dearest creature in creation’ addressed in the first line, also addressed as ‘Susy’ in line 5, might have been is unknown, though a mimeographed version of the poem in Harry Cohen’s possession is dedicated to ‘Miss Susanne Delacrux, Paris’. Presumably she was one of Nolst Trenité’s students.

Readers will notice that ‘The Chaos’ is written from the viewpoint of the foreign learner of English: it is not so much the spelling as such that is lamented, as the fact that the poor learner can never tell how to pronounce words encountered in writing (the poem was, after all, appended to a book of pronunciation exercises). With English today the prime language of international communication, this unpredictability of symbol-sound correspondence constitutes no less of a problem than the unpredictability of sound-symbol correspondence which is so bewailed by native speakers of English. Nevertheless, many native English-speaking readers will find the poem a revelation: the juxtaposition of so many differently pronounced parallel spellings brings home the sheer illogicality of the writing system in countless instances that such readers may have never previously noticed.

It would be interesting to know if Gerard Nolst Trenité, or
anyone else, has ever actually used ‘he ‘o teach English pronunciation, since the tight rhythmic and rhyming structure of the poem might prove a valuable mnemonic aid. There could be material for experiments here: non-English- speaking learners who had practised reading parts of the poem aloud could be tested in reading the same problematic words in a plain prose context, and their success measured against a control group who had not practised them through ‘The Chaos’.

This version is essentially the author’s own final text, as also published by New River Project in 1993. A few minor corrections have however been made, and occasional words from earlier editions have been preferred. Following earlier practice, words with clashing spellings or pronunciations are here printed in italics.

We hope that you enjoy this bit of fun and find it useful in teaching spelling and homophones.

**Gerard Nolst Trenité – The Chaos (1922)**

Dearest creature in creation
Studying English pronunciation,
I will teach you in my verse
Sounds like corpse, corps, horse and worse.

I will keep you, Susy, busy,
Make your head with heat grow dizzy;
Tear in eye, your dress you’ll tear;
Queer, fair seer, hear my prayer.

Pray, console your loving poet,
Make my coat look new, dear, sew it!
Just compare heart, hear and heard,
Dies and diet, lord and word.

Sword and sward, retain and Britain
(Mind the latter how it’s written).
Made has not the sound of bade,
Say—said, pay—paid, laid but plaid.

Now I surely will not plague you
With such words as vague and ague,
But be careful how you speak,
Say: gush, bush, steak, streak, break, bleak,

Previous, precious, fuchsia, via
Recipe, pipe, studding-sail, choir;
Woven, oven, how and low,
Script, receipt, shoe, poem, toe.

Say, expecting fraud and trickery:
Daughter, laughter and Terpsichore,
Branch, ranch, measles, topsails, aisles,
Missiles, similes, reviles.

Wholly, holly, signal, signing,
Same, examining, but mining,
Scholar, vicar, and cigar,
Solar, mica, war and far.

From “desire”: desirable—admirable from “admire”,
Lumber, plumber, bier, but brier,
Topsham, brougham, renown, but known,
Knowledge, done, lone, gone, none, tone,

One, anemone, Balmoral,
Kitchen, lichen, laundry, laurel.
Gertrude, German, wind and wind,
Beau, kind, kindred, queue, mankind,

Tortoise, turquoise, chamois-leather,
Reading, Reading, heathen, heather.
This phonetic labyrinth
Gives moss, gross, brook, brooch, ninth, plinth.

Have you ever yet endeavoured
To pronounce revered and severed,
Demon, lemon, ghoul, foul, soul,
Peter, petrol and patrol?

Billet does not end like ballet;
Bouquet, wallet, mallet, chalet.
Blood and flood are not like food,
Nor is mould like should and would.

Banquet is not nearly parquet,
Which exactly rhymes with khaki.
Discount, viscount, load and broad,
Toward, to forward, to reward,

Ricocheted and crocheting, croquet?
Right! Your pronunciation’s OK.
Rounded, wounded, grieve and sieve,
Friend and fiend, alive and live.

Is your r correct in higher?
Keats asserts it rhymes Thalia.
Hugh, but hug, and hood, but hoot,
Buoyant, minute, but minute.

Say abscission with precision,
Now: position and transition;
Would it tally with my rhyme
If I mentioned paradigm?

Twopence, threepence, tease are easy,
But cease, crease, grease and greasy?
Cornice, nice, valise, revise,
Rabies, but lullabies.

Of such puzzling words as nauseous,
Rhyming well with cautious, tortious,
You’ll envelop lists, I hope,
In a linen envelope.
Would you like some more? You’ll have it!

Affidavit, David, davit.

To abjure, to perjure. Sheik

Does not sound like Czech but ache.

Liberty, library, heave and heaven,
Rachel, loch, moustache, eleven.

We say hallowed, but allowed,
People, leopard, towed but vowed.

Mark the difference, moreover,
Between mover, plover, Dover.

Leeches, breeches, wise, precise,
Chalice, but police and lice,

Camel, constable, unstable,
Principle, disciple, label.

Petal, penal, and canal,
Wait, surmise, plait, promise, pal,

Suit, suite, ruin. Circuit, conduit
Rhyme with “shirk it” and “beyond it”,
But it is not hard to tell
Why it’s pall, mall, but Pall Mall.

Muscle, muscular, gaol, iron,
Timber, climber, bullion, lion,
Worm and storm, chaise, chaos, chair,
Senator, spectator, mayor,

Ivy, privy, famous; clamour
Has the a of drachm and hammer.
Pussy, hussy and possess,
Desert, but desert, address.

Golf, wolf, countenance, lieutenants
Hoist in lieu of flags left pennants.
Courier, courtier, tomb, bomb, comb,
Cow, but Cowper, some and home.
“Solder, soldier! Blood is thicker“, 
Quoth he, “than liqueur or liquor“, 
Making, it is sad but true, 
In bravado, much ado.

 Stranger does not rhyme with anger, 
Neither does devour with clangour. 
Pilot, pivot, gaunt, but aunt, 
Font, front, wont, want, grand and grant.

Arsenic, specific, scenic, 
Relic, rhetoric, hygienic. 
Gooseberry, goose, and close, but close, 
Paradise, rise, rose, and dose.

Say inveigh, neigh, but inveigle, 
Make the latter rhyme with eagle. 
Mind! Meandering but mean, 
Valentine and magazine.

And I bet you, dear, a penny, 
You say mani-(fold) like many, 
Which is wrong. Say rapier, pier, 
Tier (one who ties), but tier.

Arch, archangel; pray, does erring 
Rhyme with herring or with stirring? 
Prison, bison, treasure trove, 
Treason, hover, cover, cove, 

Perseverance, severance. Ribald 
Rhymes (but piebald doesn’t) with nibbled. 
Phaeton, paean, gnat, ghat, gnaw, 
Lien, psychic, shone, bone, pshaw.

Don’t be down, my own, but rough it, 
And distinguish buffet, buffet; 
Brood, stood, roof, rook, school, wool, boon, 
Worcester, Boleyn, to impugn.
Say in sounds correct and *sterling*
*Hearse, hear, hearken, year and yearling.*
Evil, devil, *mezzotint,*
Mind the z! (A gentle hint.)

Now you need not pay attention
To such sounds as I don’t mention,
Sounds like *pores, pause, pours* and *paws,*
Rhyming with the pronoun *yours;*

Nor are proper names *included,*
Though I often heard, as *you did,*
Funny rhymes to *unicorn,*
Yes, you know them, *Vaughan* and *Strachan.*

No, my maiden, coy and *comely,*
I don’t want to speak of *Cholmondeley.*
No. Yet *Froude* compared with *proud*
Is no better than *McLeod.*

But mind *trivial* and *vial,*
*Tripod, menial, denial,*
*Troll* and *trolley, realm* and *ream,*
*Schedule, mischief, schism,* and *scheme.*

*Argil, gill, Argyll, gill.* Surely
May be made to rhyme with *Raleigh,*
But you’re not supposed to say
*Piquet* rhymes with *sobriquet.*

Had this *invalid invalid*
Worthless documents? How *pallid,*
How *uncouth* he, *couchant,* looked,
When for *Portsmouth* I had booked!

*Zeus, Thebes, Thales, Aphrodite,*
*Paramour, enamoured, flighty,*
*Episodes, antipodes,*
*Acquiesce, and obsequies.*
Please don’t monkey with the geyser,
Don’t peel ‘taters with my razor,
Rather say in accents pure:
Nature, stature and mature.

Pious, impious, limb, climb, glumly,
Worsted, worsted, crumbly, dumbly,
Conquer, conquest, vase, phase, fan,
Wan, sedan and artisan.

The th will surely trouble you
More than r, ch or w.
Say then these phonetic gems:
Thomas, thyme, Theresa, Thames.

Thompson, Chatham, Waltham, Streatham,
There are more but I forget ‘em–
Wait! I’ve got it: Anthony,
Lighten your anxiety.

The archaic word albeit
Does not rhyme with eight—you see it;
With and forthwith, one has voice,
One has not, you make your choice.

Shoes, goes, does *. Now first say: finger;
Then say: singer, ginger, linger.
Real, zeal, mauve, gauze and gauge,
Marriage, foliage, mirage, age,

Hero, heron, query, very,
Parry, tarry fury, bury,
Dost, lost, post, and doth, cloth, loth,
Job, Job, blossom, bosom, oath.

Faugh, oppugnant, keen oppugners,
Bowling, bowing, banjo-tuners
Holm you know, but noes, canoes,
Puisne, truism, use, to use?
Though the difference seems little,
We say actual, but victual,
Seat, sweat, chaste, caste, Leigh, eight, height,
Put, nut, granite, and unite.

Reefer does not rhyme with deafer,
Feoffer does, and zephyr, heifer.
Dull, bull, Geoffrey, George, ate, late,
Hint, pint, senate, but sedate.

Gaelic, Arabic, pacific,
Science, conscience, scientific;
Tour, but our, dour, succour, four,
Gas, alas, and Arkansas.

Say manoeuvre, yacht and vomit,
Next omit, which differs from it
Bona fide, alibi
Gyrate, dowry and awry.

Sea, idea, guinea, area,
Psalm, Maria, but malaria.
Youth, south, southern, cleanse and clean,
Doctrine, turpentine, marine.

Compare alien with Italian,
Dandelion with battalion,
Rally with ally; yea, ye,
Eye, I, ay, aye, whey, key, quay!

Say aver, but ever, fever,
Neither, leisure, skein, receiver.
Never guess—it is not safe,
We say calves, valves, half, but Ralf.

Starry, granary, canary,
Crevice, but device, and eyrie,
Face, but preface, then grimace,
Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.
Bass, large, target, gin, give, verging,  
Ought, oust, joust, and scour, but scourging;  
Ear, but earn; and ere and tear  
Do not rhyme with here but heir.

Mind the o of off and often  
Which may be pronounced as orphan,  
With the sound of saw and sauce;  
Also soft, lost, cloth and cross.

Pudding, puddle, putting. Putting?  
Yes: at golf it rhymes with shutting.  
Respite, spite, consent, resent.  
Liable, but Parliament.

Seven is right, but so is even,  
Hyphen, roughen, nephew, Stephen,  
Monkey, donkey, clerk and jerk,  
Asp, grasp, wasp, demesne, cork, work.

A of valour, vapid vapour,  
S of news (compare newspaper),  
G of gibbet, gibbon, gist,  
I of antichrist and grist,

Differ like diverse and divers,  
Rivers, strivers, shivers, fivers.  
Once, but nonce, toll, doll, but roll,  
Polish, Polish, poll and poll.

Pronunciation-think of Psyche!-  
Is a paling, stout and spiky.  
Won’t it make you lose your wits  
Writing groats and saying “grits”?  

It’s a dark abyss or tunnel  
Strewn with stones like rowlock, gunwale,  
Islington, and Isle of Wight,  
Housewife, verdict and indict.
Don’t you think so, reader, rather,
Saying lather, bather, father?
Finally, which rhymes with enough,
Though, through, bough, cough, hough, sough, tough??

Hiccough has the sound of sup…
My advice is: GIVE IT UP!