

ENGLISH IN SOUTH AFRICA – A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD (6)

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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>). 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. [15] 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.

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[1] 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).

[2] 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).

[3] 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: 282). 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).

[8] "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).

[9] "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).

[10] 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>)

[11] “[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)

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

[13] 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).

[15] This third language may be an official language or a foreign language
(<http://www.info.gov.za/view/DownloadFileAction?id=70257>)