

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors that prevent the use of Black languages as media of instruction and also proposed strategies for promoting black languages in Black universities. Black Africans constitute the majority in almost all the provinces of South Africa. They are followed by Coloured, Whites and Indians or Asians. Coloured people constitute the largest group in the Western Cape while Black African people constitute the largest group in all other provinces. In all the provinces where Blacks constitute majority they do not receive education through the media of their own mother languages. This is despite the fact that the Constitution adopted in 1994 recognises all the eleven languages in the country. The equality accorded to the eleven languages is just on paper and not in practice. English and Afrikaans are the only two languages used as media of instruction in all the 25 universities in the country. Black learners have revolted against the use of Afrikaans in 1976 as a medium of instruction and are again revolting against the same language in the 2016. This study revealed that there is a lack of transformational leadership on the side of politicians and policy makers to implement the requirements of the constitution. The study has also found that Black students do not understand the importance of language as a function of culture because instead of fighting for an African language to be a medium of instruction, they fight to replace Afrikaans with a colonial language, English. A study by Neethling has revealed that one of South African languages isiXhosa has the potential to develop as a medium of instruction. This study recommends that government should develop an agenda of transformation with time frames to force universities to introduce African languages as media of instruction. Universities should from time to time submit their reports to the Department of Education and be presented to parliament. Transforming councils will facilitate changes in the curriculum and medium of instruction. Government should mobilise resources to promote the wider use of indigenous languages throughout the country.

Keywords: Medium of instruction; Language and culture; South Africa; Colonialism and apartheid.

INTRODUCTION

The Language issue in South Africa has become a contested terrain of struggle and also a struggle about the basic human right for expression in the mother tongue (de Klerk 1996:8). Language occupies a crucial strategic position in developed and developing countries. It is used by developed countries, generally known as the capitalist bloc, to facilitate the process of underdevelopment of Africa (Rodney 2012: xi). According to Rodney, the superstructure in any society determines human development (2012:9). Therefore this means that human beings must fight to destroy the superstructure that impedes their development and create a new one that promotes human development. Language is one of the instruments used by the powerful to force on the powerless the use of someone else's language in learning so that they would not be able to comprehend what they are supposed to learn. The powerless do not receive education through the medium of their mother tongue but are forced to use someone else's language while others may use their native language as medium of instruction. In this

case language is isolated from culture rather than being treated as a function of culture (Prah 1991:30). Culture is regarded as a total way of life that includes what people eat, wear and talk (Rodney 2012: 34; Alexander 2006:3). Leopold Senghor, cited in (SAPEM 1991:31), argues that to be 'ignorant of one's mother tongue is to be uprooted from one's background'. In order to address cultural disjuncture, east and central Africa developed a language known as Swahili (kiSwahili) spoken by many other countries in Africa to harmonise and close cultural gaps (SAPEM 1991:30). South Africa was invaded in 1652 when Jan van Riebeeck arrived with Dutch Calvinist Settlers. Van Riebeeck was sent on an expedition to establish a refreshment station of fresh fruit, vegetables and meat for passing ships of the Dutch East Indian Company. In 1820 a group of settlers also made their way into the land. More and more European settlers kept arriving in South Africa and this led to the colonisation and occupation of South Africa by the Dutch. South Africa changed hands between the Dutch and the British Crown when in 1795 it fell under the latter till 1803 when it fell to the Dutch again, only to fall back to the British in 1806 and Dutch settlers moved to the north to avoid British rule.

In 1899 the war between the Dutch and British known as the Anglo-Boer War broke out and the Dutch were defeated and the Peace of Vereeniging was signed in 1902 (South African History Online on 31-Mar-2011). The population of South Africa is 54, 9 million. Almost eight in ten people in the country are Black Africans. Coloureds, whites and Indian or Asian follow in that order. Coloured people constitute the largest group in the Western Cape. Black African people constitute the largest group in all other provinces (STATSSA 2015). Figure (1) below shows the population by province and population group: by percentage.

Figure 1

Population Group	WC	EC	NC	FS	KZN	NW	GP	MP	LP	SA
Black African	32.8	86.3	50.4	87.6	86.6	89.8	77.4	90.7	96.7	79.2
Coloured	48.8	8.3	40.3	3.1	1.4	2.0	3.5	0.9	0.3	8.9
Indian or Asian	1.0	0.4	0.7	0.4	7.4	0.6	2.9	0.7	0.3	2.5
White	15.7	4.7	7.1	8.7	4.2	7.3	15.6	7.5	2.6	8.9
Other	1.6	0.3	1.6	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.7	0.2	0.2	0.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

South Africa has 25 universities which are classified according to their location and characteristics. There are traditional Black universities; English-medium universities and Afrikaans-medium universities. Their character was determined by the former apartheid government which discriminated against Blacks in favour of whites. Afrikaans universities from 1994 have begun to open their doors to all the population groups but the instrument used to close doors to blacks is the language issue. Afrikaans is being used as medium of instruction and this creates problems in universities, even those that offer education in English.

The constitution has given all the country's 11 languages equal status but none of the nine Black languages is used as a medium of instruction in any of the universities. It is only English and Afrikaans which enjoy this recognition as media of instruction. South Africa is a multi-lingual society that has some unique linguistic problems because of its previous apartheid policies. On one level, there are tensions between its two official language groups,

English and Afrikaans. On another level, there are linguistic tensions between the ethnic European and the black majority, mostly concerning the issue of which language to use with language to language instruction in schools. This issue was the spark that ignited the tragic 1976 uprising in South Africa when students revolted against the minority government that represented it. They wanted to overthrow it but unfortunately the leaders of 1976 are now the ones in power and they are failing to implement the call of the constitution.

So, Blacks receive university education through the medium of foreign languages while others, such as whites, receive education in their mother tongues. In order to address this challenge, there is a need for a radical break with the international capitalist system which is the principal agency of underdevelopment in Africa (Rodney 2012: xi). In his *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1967) in support of Rodney called upon the African people to devise their own way of development and work out their own concepts and not imitate Europe (Fanon 1967:252-255). This study investigates the factors that prevent the use of Black languages as media of instruction and proposes strategies for promoting black languages in Black universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

South Africa experienced a student revolution in 1976 when students challenged the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction (Molobi in Cobbett and Cohen 1988:155). They equated the Afrikaans language with that of their oppressors being the native speakers of the language, who ruled South Africa through the policy of apartheid from 1948-1994. They demanded to be taught in their own languages. Yet South African Blacks have never been taught in their own languages but only in either English or Afrikaans. According to Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981) the “real aim of colonialism was to control the people’s wealth: what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed: to control in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life”. He further argued that “colonialism destroyed or undervalued their culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, oratory and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser” (Thiongo 1981:16).

Students had been and were responding to the failure by the apartheid government authorities to recognise the use of mother tongue languages in 1976. The leaders of the revolution of 1976 are now those in power today but they have not addressed the language issue. Students of institutions of higher learning are again revolting against the same Afrikaans language they revolted against in 1976. They see the language as an instrument aimed at preventing them from engaging fully in all aspects of the economy and the life of the country (Fanon 1967:120).

This they see as a stumbling block that prevents them from reaching learning potential because learning through foreign languages inhibits their progress. Michael Skapinker is of the opinion that language barriers may also extend to corporate spaces, thus disadvantaging speakers of minority languages (Business Day April 1 2016).

Most of the learners in Southern Africa do not receive education through the medium of their first language but only through their second language which is mainly English (Uys et al 2007:69). Students who are successful in education are those who have mastered English whereas failure is attributed to poor command of English which inhibits understanding of the subject matter. In this case, those who drop out of school have not actually failed; it is simply

that the language has been a barrier to learning. A language of instruction is regarded as a tool that facilitates learning of the content subjects (Kyeyume 2010; Webb 2004). The Report of the Ministerial Committee established by the Ministry of Education to investigate the possibility of making African languages a medium of instruction in higher education came to the conclusion that the growth of both English and Afrikaans has marginalised indigenous African languages (Report of Ministerial Committee 2003:4). This marginalisation was the result of both colonial and missionary influence (Report of Ministerial Committee 2003:4). A study conducted in Tanzania on the use of English as a medium of instruction found that 69.5% of the students could not understand when English was used as a medium of instruction. 78% of the teachers responded that English was a setback to students and resulted in poor performance (Bryson 2013: 90).

The findings revealed that most of the students were excited by the use of English as a medium of instruction. But it further revealed that an English medium background is crucial and that together with a supportive home environment with appropriate learning strategies academic performance may be improved and objectives achieved. (Shahzad et al 2013: 36). A study conducted in Libya on the use of English as the medium of instruction by Tantam et al. (2013) made the following findings: English would adversely affect the students' academic performance. The results also revealed that students were of the view that if they knew English more doors would be opened to them in case they wanted to go Europe even if they performed poorly at schools. But the results also revealed that students prefer to be taught in Arabic because it made it easier for them to study (2013: p.19). The above study findings are consistent with those of the British Council and the University of Oxford's Department of Education that attributes the rise of English to the fact that many see it as a passport to global academic and business communities (Dearden 2014:2). The study also reveals that University Administrators tend to regard English as an opportunity to recruit high fee-paying international students and thus raise global rankings whereas lecturers are more idealistic, saying it would improve the exchange of ideas and promote better relations between countries (Dearden 2014:2).

A second language as the medium of instruction at universities in developing countries, be it English or French, is one of the factors contributing to poor performance (Nyika 2014:1). The use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English, leads to higher failure (Dearden 2014:2). In post-apartheid South Africa, there is a tendency amongst members of the emerging African middle class to enroll their children in schools where English is taught as a first language, which were previously reserved for individuals classified as "white" (Dalvat et al 2009:37). From the point of view of immaterial (human) resources, the use of African Languages in education offers a clear advantage compared to English; many teachers in South African Schools are speakers of an African Language (Dalyat et al 2009: 45).

There is an on-going debate in South African universities involving a revolution to ensure that the language issue is resolved once and for all. However, their target is Afrikaans as used in Afrikaans-medium universities. This debate and the revolution is influenced by the view expressed by Nyika (2014:1) that learning the official language of instruction is a barrier that prevents a number of students from performing well at universities. It is only those students whose mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction who stand a better chance of performing well when compared with non-native students (Nyika 2014:1). These findings are consistent with those of Tshotsho (2013:39) who found that in South Africa before 1994, only those students whose mother tongue was English or Afrikaans were put in an

advantageous position. This is still the case even today more than 20 years into democracy where Afrikaans and English are still the dominant languages in a country where the majority speak African languages as a home language (Tshotsho 2014:39). Chapter two of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 gives all eleven languages equal status (Constitution of South Africa (1996)). This however is only in theory because in reality the other languages are not used as media of instruction in education. This is the reason why students at universities are protesting and temporarily closing campuses to force them into submission. The use of European languages in South African classrooms at the expense of indigenous languages is perceived as linguistic imperialism (Klu et al 2013). But it is also interesting that Afrikaners claim that Afrikaans is not a foreign language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparison of population groups in the provinces

Black Africans constitute the majority in almost all the provinces of South Africa. Eight in ten people in the country are Black Africans. Coloured and then white people follow, then Indian or Asian. Coloured people constitute the largest group in the Western Cape while Black African people constitute the largest group in all other provinces as reflected in Figure 1. This would suggest that universities in these provinces should be offering education through the medium of African languages but instead it is the smallest percentage of the population whose language is used a medium of instruction in all the universities in the country. Of course in the Western Cape, Coloureds are in the majority with 48.8% followed closely by Black Africans with 32.8%. In this province it would make sense if the medium of instruction was Afrikaans for Coloureds and isiXhosa for Black Africans.

Constitutional language crisis

While the constitution guarantees equality to all the eleven languages, it is only English and Afrikaans which are privileged over African languages. The equality accorded to the eleven languages is just on paper and not in practice. In the Afrikaans universities, the medium of instruction is Afrikaans and English as is clear in (Figure 4). English is used as a medium of instruction in English universities as is shown in (Figure 3). It is interesting that in the Black universities (Figure 5), the medium of instruction is English and not any of the Black languages.

The study by Neethling revealed that African languages, particularly Xhosa, have the potential to be developed first as a medium of instruction in the school system while at the same time moving towards the possibility of being a medium of instruction at the institutions of higher learning (Neethling 2010:61). Figure 2 shows that in the Eastern Cape, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population speak isiXhosa as their first language but none of the universities in the Cape, namely Cape Town, Fort Hare and Stellenbosch use isiXhosa as a medium of instruction. In Limpopo Province, Sepedi, Xitsonga and Tshivenda are the majority languages but none of the universities in this province, namely the Universities of Limpopo and Venda use any of these languages as a medium of instruction. The same applies to Gauteng where a variety of languages are spoken and where the universities of Pretoria and Johannesburg are situated but no African language is used as a medium of instruction in these universities.

Pitfalls of national consciousness in South African universities

Democratic government has adopted the two European languages and endorsed their legal status above those of Africans in universities. Afrikaans universities have accommodated English to create a dual medium of instruction. English is the language of fewer than four million people in South Africa but their speakers enjoy an advantage over all the other languages in the country. It enjoys a monopoly over educational matters in the whole country. It is also used as a medium of instruction even in the Afrikaans universities and as a sole medium in all Black universities. This means that English is used as a medium of instruction in all South African universities.

This situation therefore continues to de-link language as a function of culture. Clearly the South African government is not sensitive to the needs of Africans but only interested in promoting European languages, namely English and Afrikaans. This confirms what Fanon calls 'pitfalls of national consciousness (Fanon 1967). It is clear that there was no agenda to transform South Africa during the decolonising period.

Lack of understanding of the importance of language

South African students are protesting against the use of Afrikaans while favouring English as a medium of instruction. Blacks do not understand that language is a function of culture and a basic human right. Normally Blacks should be fighting for African languages as medium of instruction rather than English. This is consistent with the view of Ngugi wa Thiongo who argued that there is a lack of radical transformation in African countries due to the entrenched culture of colonialism (Ngugi Wa Thiongo 1981).

Fanon (1967) writes that this is a result of the failure to decolonise the mind by African leaders. It was observed by Alexander (2006) that "They do not understand that language is a basic right and a vital political and economic resource and that ignorance of one's language negates such rights and resources" (Alexander 2006).

Betrayal of 1976 generation and its revolution

The uprising of 1976 was sparked by the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools (Silva 1997; Molobi in Cobbett and Cohen 1998). The democratic government adopted a constitution in 1996 which guaranteed all the eleven languages equality before the law and made the use of them a human right. But unfortunately this guarantee has been ignored and has never been implemented and as a result African languages have been swept under the carpet with only Afrikaans and English as the sole media of instruction. There can be no reason why African languages cannot be elevated to the media of instruction as the study by Neethling (2010:61) revealed, provided that resources are put in place, African languages can be developed to reach a level where they can be used as media of instruction, first in schools and later in institutions of higher learning. The 1976 generation is the one in power today but it is clear that there is a generation gap which fails to realise that the two periods 1976 and 1994 are not a distinct but a continuous process.

Lack of resources to promote African languages

While other languages have been promoted and resourced to be scientific, South Africa has not made any effort beyond legislation. The country should invest and engage in research to

ensure that these languages reach the status where they can be used as media of instruction. Leopold Senghor cited in (SAPEM 1991:31), has argued that to be 'ignorant of one's mother tongue is to be uprooted from one's background'.

There is also a saying that a society that does not know its culture is doomed. So South Africa will continue lamenting that it does not have the skills necessary to develop the country because the medium of instruction has been ignored in the more than 20 years of democracy. If resources are put in place, African languages, as has been revealed by Neethling (2010:61) can be used as the media of instruction, first in schools and later in institutions of higher learning.

Lack of transformational political leadership

South Africa experienced a revolution in 1976 when students challenged the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction (Molobi in Cobbett and Cohen 1988:155). They equated the Afrikaans language with that of the oppressor who ruled South Africa through the policy of apartheid from 1948-1994. They demanded to be taught in their own languages. But the present government is afraid of implementing language transformation other than paying lip service to the constitution. There is a lack of leadership to promote the aspirations and needs of the citizens.

Strategies for promoting African languages as a medium of instruction in South African universities

Holding universities accountable

The former Minister of Education has admitted that the state has been unable to hold institutions accountable for not pursuing a change in higher education (Pandor 2016:5). The government of South Africa should develop an agenda of transformation with time frames. Universities should from time to time submit their reports to the Department of Education and be presented to parliament. The study by Neethling (2010: 66) has revealed that for fear of compromising its character as an Afrikaans-medium University, Stellenbosch has been slow in taking steps to promote Xhosa as a language of teaching and learning.

Transformation of university councils

In order to transform universities, there is a need to enforce a balanced representation to reflect the ethnic diversity of the population of South Africa. Currently, councils are predominantly white and still undergoing the process of transformation from apartheid. Transforming councils will facilitate changes in the curriculum and medium of instruction.

Development of African languages

All languages have developed over time. As was discussed earlier about the development of Afrikaans, in 1948 the National Party came to power and promoted the use of Afrikaans in all spheres of government. The current government should now mobilise resources to promote the wider use of indigenous languages throughout the country. There is a need to promote these languages other than foreign languages, including Afrikaans. Many students should be given incentives to study African languages at university.

Political Management of the Department of Education

In order to promote languages so that they become in due course media of instruction, there is a need for ministers of education to be university trained. They should have an understanding of the transformation agenda. These political leaders should be accountable to parliament in terms of transformation in education. This will be in accordance with the policies of the National Executive Committee (NEC) which is committed to making necessary interventions at all levels of education and encourage the culture of learning, teaching and discipline. This reflects the Freedom Charter's demand that the doors of learning and of culture shall be open for all (ANC NEC 2001:2). It is also consistent with the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) which calls for the liberation of blacks in general and Africans in particular who comprises the majority in this country (Umrabulo 1997:55). Figure 2 provides population by first language and province (percentage)

Figure 2

Language	WC	EC	NC	FS	KZN	NW	GP	MP	LP	SA
Afrikaans	4.7	10.6	53.8	12.7	1.6	9.0	12.4	7.2	2.6	13.5
English	20.2	5.6	3.4	2.9	13.2	3.5	13.3	3.1	1.5	9.6
IsiNdebele	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.4	1.1	1.3	3.2	10.1	2.0	2.1
IsiXhosa	24.70.4	78.8	5.3	7.5	3.4	5.5	6.6	1.2	0.4	16.0
IsiZulu	0.1	0.5	0.8	4.4	77.8	2.5	19.8	24.1	1.2	22.7
Sepedi	1.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	02	2.4	10.6	9.3	52.9	9.1
Sesotho	0.4	2.5	1.3	64.2	0.8	5.8	116	3.5	1.5	7.6
Setswana	0.4	0.2	33.1	5.2	0.5	63.4	9.1	1.8	2.0	8.0
Sign Language	0.1	0.7	0.3	1.2	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.5
SiSwati	0.1	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.3	1.1	27.7	0.5	2.5
Tshivenda	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.5	2.3	0.3	16.7	2.4
Xitsonga	0.2	0.6	0.1	0.3	0.1	3.7	6.6	10.4	17.0	4.5
Other	2.2	0.6	11	0.6	0.8	1.8	3.1	1.0	1.6	1.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Statistics South Africa 2011

The continued use of European languages in African classrooms has been labelled by some as 'linguistic imperialism' in the literature. Questionable arguments have been advanced to justify the official neglect of indigenous African languages in education, but the reality is that such arguments are no longer valid. Efforts by some African governments to remedy the situation have been mediocre at best. For instance, South Africa has 11 official languages but English and Afrikaans remain the *de facto* media of instruction in schools. No significant efforts are being made to develop and encourage the use of indigenous African languages in schools. In addition, Departments of African languages are being scaled down in South African universities, and the colleges of Education which were at the forefront of teaching these languages have been closed down Klul et al (2013:35). Figure (3) shows South African universities with English as medium of instruction. No African language is used as a medium of instruction, only English.

Figure 3

University name	Medium of instruction
University of Cape Town	English
University of KZN	English
University of Witwatersrand	English
Rhodes University	English
University of the Western Cape	English

The following Figure (4) shows Afrikaans universities who use both English and Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. These universities changed after 1994 to accommodate English as previously they were Afrikaans medium. The University of the Western Cape (UWC) changed its medium of instruction from Afrikaans to English but not to any African languages (Neethling 2010: 67).

Figure 4

University Name	Medium of instruction
University of Free State	Afrikaans & English
University of North West	Afrikaans & English
University of Pretoria	Afrikaans & English
University of Stellenbosch	Afrikaans & English
University of Johannesburg	Afrikaans & English

Below is a list of traditional African universities which were built for Africans as part of separate development under the apartheid system. Even when these universities were founded as such, they never offered instruction in any African language but only in English. Therefore, Africans have been receiving education through the medium of foreign languages. What is interesting is that, confronted with this dilemma, they still choose one of the colonial languages namely English. They reject Afrikaans language in favour of English. Figure 5 shows Black universities.

Figure 5

University Name	Medium of instruction
University of Limpopo	English
University of Zululand	English
University of Fort Hare	English
University of Venda	English
Walter Sisulu University	English
Medunsa	English

CONCLUSIONS

Despite their revolt against the use of Afrikaans in 1976, African students are still subjected to Afrikaans at universities under the democratic dispensation. Although there are traditional African / Black universities, they do not offer instruction through the medium of any African language. African students prefer to receive tuition through the medium of English, still a foreign language, rather than fighting to have tuition through the medium of an African language. The government is also failing to implement the provisions of the constitution which gives all languages equal status. This is due to lack of transformational political

leadership in South Africa. The revolt of 1976, which also contributed to the overthrow of the apartheid government, was in vain because even after more than 20 years of democracy Afrikaans is still a force. As a result, every single university in SA is either English-medium, Afrikaans-medium or a combination of both. Black languages still play no role in teaching in any institute of higher education.

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