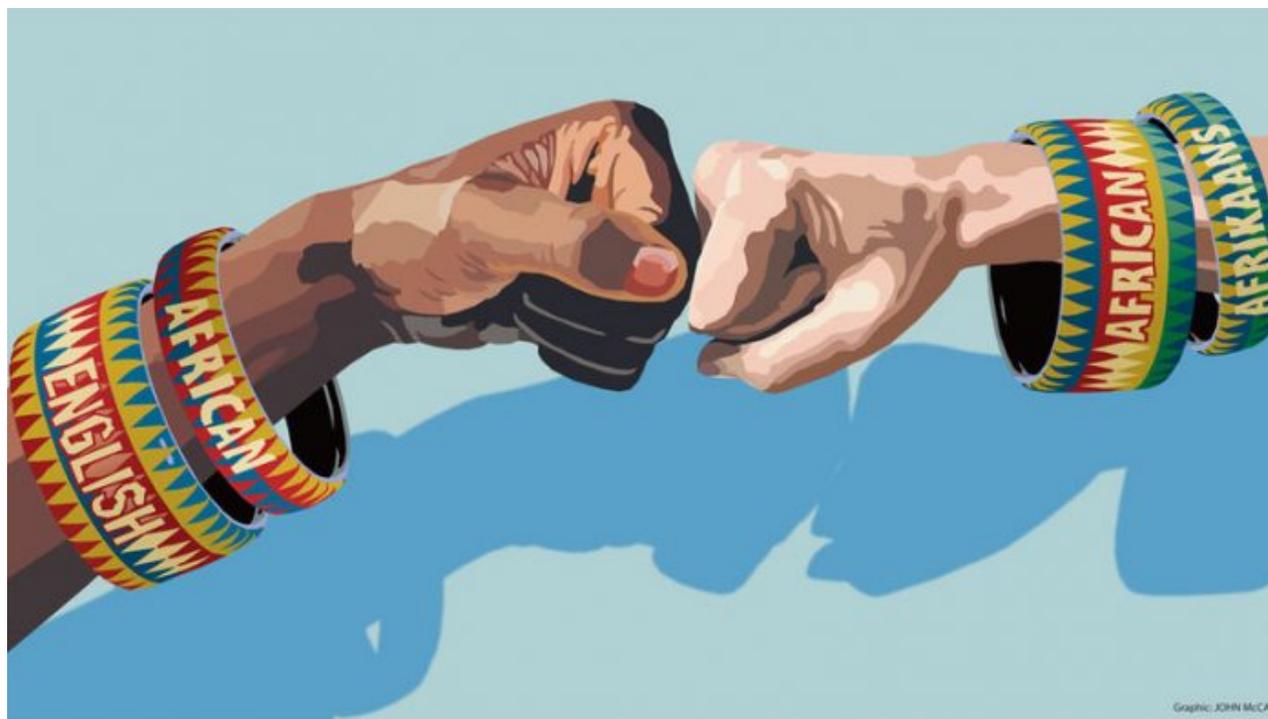


The language of Afrikaans is not the problem

Conrad Steenkamp 2 Aug 2020



READ ALL OUR CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE

Once a year, Unisa honours [Dr Neville Alexander](#), one of the most eminent advocates of multilingualism in South Africa, by way of a commemorative lecture. How does one reconcile this with the institution’s position regarding Afrikaans as outlined by the Unisa vice-chancellor, Professor Mandla Makhanya in his article “[On language, power and privilege in tertiary education](#)” (*M&G* July 9)?

In his work, Alexander created a powerful philosophical vision of a country unified by multilingualism and the development of indigenous languages. He considered this fundamental to the development of a participatory and inclusive democracy, economy and society.

Because of the link between multilingualism and a just society, the single-minded movement towards mainly-English or English-only in most domains, such as education, since the 1990s alarmed Alexander. He expressly warned against the prevalent shift from bilingualism to English-only or mainly-English instruction, viewing it as the death knell of multilingualism. What happened to Afrikaans, according to him, would determine the fate of the other official languages and thereby the very nature of South African society.

Comparing the “triumphalism” in Anglophile circles with the hubris of the architects of apartheid, Alexander argued that the hegemony of English in important domains would cement the political and economic power of the English-speaking elite — while marginalising the speakers of the indigenous languages. English would remain “unattainable” yet “unassailable”.

We have indeed made considerable progress towards the linguistic dystopia imagined by Alexander. Polarising and politicised ethnic battles about language that divide the speakers of the indigenous languages testify to this. Opting for English at Unisa, in full awareness of its status as the destroyer of languages and its vast colonial baggage, similarly reflects this dystopia — as does Unisa’s argument that the move from bilingualism to English-only represents a first step towards multilingualism. The apparent intention to require Unisa students to study at least one African language — barring Afrikaans — serves as yet another indicator of Alexander’s dystopia.

It seems all languages are not equal at Unisa, and that some are more equal than others.

Makhanya justifies the treatment of Afrikaans by characterising it as a **white language** irretrievably tainted by apartheid and racism. Its defenders are preoccupied with the loss of power and are clinging to privilege through language. They are blind to their own prejudices and ignore the language rights of others. In their presumed selfishness, they do not recognise the need for other languages to become languages of science as well. In any event, even the white Afrikaans students at Unisa are increasingly opting for English.

Alexander himself did not mince words about the apartheid baggage of the standardised version of Afrikaans. He also, however, considered it a rudimentary category mistake to equate the attitudes of some of the mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans with the language itself. Afrikaans is a majority black language that played an important role in the struggle against apartheid. Alexander, like many others, therefore promoted it as a language of freedom and reconciliation — along with the ongoing re-standardisation of the language to bridge the gaps between its speakers.

Makhanya's piece shows Afrikaans still has a long road to acceptance. It is time, however, to rethink attitudes towards the language. It deserves a place at the table along with all the other official languages. This is especially true of Unisa which provides an essential service to communities that may otherwise struggle to gain access to a tertiary education. It is, in fact, the Afrikaans youth from such communities that have been rendered invisible in this discussion. Many of these experience Afrikaans as a language of empowerment, one they can use to overcome poverty.

What to do? How can we move towards pragmatic and inclusive multilingualism?

Alexander argued that one could overcome the marginalisation and eventual demise of the indigenous languages only by way of bottom-up pressure for multilingualism and an alliance of non-dominant languages. As part of such an alliance, Afrikaans must share its linguistic resources, expertise and networks and help to re-establish a balance between the languages.

Alexander spoke approvingly about the excellent collaboration between Afrikaans lexicographers and others as far back as 2001. Collaboration has grown since then and good progress has been made, especially with the development of cybernetic resources for the African languages. Unisa, in fact, participates in one of these creative, synergistic programmes.

Most Afrikaans language specialists, organisations and advocates, furthermore, have thrown their weight behind multilingualism and the promotion of the indigenous languages. Why would they do otherwise? Collaboration and synergy represent the only viable way forward for Afrikaans and the other indigenous languages. They are all in the same boat.

The reported lack of enthusiasm for Afrikaans on the part of some students reflect a wider challenge faced by all the indigenous languages. When languages are presented as problems rather than valuable resources, they tend to lose status and attractiveness in the eyes of their young users. Also, the language climate generated by English-only or mainly-English instruction at institutions inevitably undermines the status and interest in the non-dominant languages involved. In such situations, ideology, or top-down compulsion by way of obligatory courses, will not halt the downward spiral. Instead, the linguistic climate in the institutions must change.

English is a valuable resource, but we cannot continue to promote it at the expense of the indigenous languages — including Afrikaans.

We have reached a linguistic inflection point where we must embrace the hegemony of English and the ruin of the other official languages — or execute a paradigm shift. English must be de-centred to liberate the transformative potency of the indigenous languages. Moving towards a pragmatic, tolerant and inclusive multilingualism would truly honour the legacy of Alexander, while helping to build a more inclusive, democratic and just society.

The Afrikaans Language Council (**Afrikaanse Taalraad**) actively promotes pragmatic multilingualism and the development of the other indigenous languages of the country. We would welcome an exploratory discussion with Unisa about collaboration.

Dr Conrad Steenkamp is the chief executive of the Afrikaanse Taalraad

Visit our hub for all our essential coronavirus coverage
