

(Ab)using language for narrow socio-political and racist interests

Mashudu Mashige

Opinion

2022-03-02



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Ons gebruik koekies om seker te maak dat ons webwerf effektief werk. Stem jy in tot die gebruik van koekies as jy ons webwerf besoek?

Ja Nee Koekiebeleid

Proposed changes to the Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill continue to spark debate. Mashudu C Mashige weighs in.

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I am a firm believer in the “salad bowl” mentality despite its complicated nature.

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The media have been awash with news of “that School” which used Afrikaans as a language of “othering” and of excluding black learners. This was ostensibly done to protect Afrikaans and its concomitant culture. I beg to differ. Language was being (ab)used here as a tool of exclusion by those who have lost political power. Having grown up with the ability to exclude and racially segregate, they no longer have any stick with which to do so. So they resort to Afrikaans becoming a means to their ends.

Lest I be misunderstood as being anti-Afrikaans, I am not. I am used to being branded that, though, like when I was appointed as chairperson for the Afrikaanse Taalmuseum en -monument. People pursue a trajectory without facts by simply judging a person’s cultural and educational backgrounds as a means to exclude them. That is why I argue here about the misuse and/or abuse of Afrikaans. Mind you, this is a language with a rich history in its development, one that even borrowed from the San languages for its formation.

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I am not an apologist, like those who scream at their highest volume for the development of African languages, but without providing funds necessary for such development. I am referring here to people who are ready to invest in the development of a language, like the current Afrikaans which at some stage of its development was called a *kombuistaal* (a language of the kitchen). That did not sap the determination of those who wanted to see Afrikaans developed for use in the legal, economic and other spheres of life. But this cannot happen by using the politics of exclusion to ensure that black children are excluded from the so-called Afrikaans-medium schools. Not at all!

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...

Afrikaans has variants, like Kaaps. The debate about the use of Kaaps in education is ongoing at both ends of the spectrum, with the one group arguing for the use of Kaaps in education and the “purists” who think that Kaaps is a bastardisation of “real” (*egte*) Afrikaans.

Other indigenous languages have similar variants, and Madimabe Geoff Mapaya (2019) speaks of “advocacy for the use of *Sehanamwa* technical terms in academic discourse without subjecting to the rules of grammar as they obtain in English”. *Sehanamwa* is a language which falls within Sesotho categories of languages spoken in Limpopo.

Back, then, to our argument: We cannot, and should not, use the underdevelopment of African languages as an excuse to exclude children from access to education.

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To top it all, one finds that those who are calling for the exclusive use of Afrikaans in certain schools are actually inviting antipathy to Afrikaans, because people start arguing that it is the language of the former oppressors, who are still trying so hard to impose their will on the majority. This seems to have turned into some form of annual political football that politicians use to their advantage, which is a shame.

Afrikaans is not an exclusive language for racist Afrikaners. In fact, the majority of its speakers, by dint of history, are not “Afrikaners”, certainly not in the way some Afrikaners portray themselves. In fact, it is a matter that has become quotidian to language developers and promoters to make sure Afrikaans is not linked to an exclusive group.

Afrikaans speakers, all of them, are people who have founded Afrikaans as a language of opportunity and commerce. This is why Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) developed the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT), which they defined as “that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations”.

Let us develop African languages so that they can become more academic and can therefore be used in government, in schools, and for commerce and treated with parity and equity.

EVT is divided into three categories, namely demography, institutional support and status.

Institutional support and status involves far more than just mouthing platitudes to the electorate. It means a dogged determination, as displayed in the development of Afrikaans to where it is today from the time of the Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners in Paarl, the organisation that helped strengthen Afrikaners’ identity and pride in their language.

Again, this is not linked to race. I had never aspired to be a member of Afrikaanse Taalmuseum en -monument, but when the call came from the Minister of Arts and Recreation to chair the Board, I accepted. It was to help transform the organisation, and that led to the appointment of the current director of that institution, Michael Jonas (who, by the way, is not white, even though he speaks Afrikaans as his first language). The Board did not appoint him for his blackness, but because he is competent and has senior academic qualifications in the field of museums. He became a “fit for purpose” candidate.

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No my people, nothing better will be achieved by using Afrikaans as a means of exclusion in the politics of identity. I am a firm believer in the “salad bowl” mentality despite its complicated nature. There are many ingredients of the salad, but one will still taste the lettuce, the tomato, the onion, the green pepper and all the other ingredients distinctly while still enjoying the salad, a new concoction. That’s what ALL of us as South Africans should strive for.

South Africa needs more people who speak truth to power without worrying too much about whom they will upset, otherwise the nation will be rent asunder by the politics of exclusion and race which, ironically favour the use of English as a so-called universal language that was purported to be able to unify the oppressed majority.

Never should one language be used to exclude. Simply to push English in and move other languages out is equally wrong. While it is helping spawn new identities of children for whom English is used as a first language and we pride ourselves even in shopping malls in defending the fact that our children speak only English and do not understand the vernacular language of their parents, it is not the right direction. Somehow we inevitably expose our little knowledge that English, like all other languages, is vernacular to first-language speakers of that language.

Sources

Giles, H, RY Bourhis and DM Taylor. 1977. Dimensions of Welsh identity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 2:165–74.

Mapaya, MG. 2019. *Mmino wa SetŠo: Indigenous African music of Bahananwa*. Footprint Press, South Africa.

See also

[BAQONDE and multilingual education in South Africa: An interview with Lorna Carson](#)

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Skoleseminaar en Wysigingswetsontwerp: waarom Afrikaanse ouers moet kennis neem

Skoleseminaar en die Wysigingswetsontwerp: Lesufi is die brein agter Afrikaans se verkragting

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Kommentaar

Theo du Plessis

2022-03-04 at 11:05

Nice sentiment. However, it might be too late in the day to call for the development of the other indigenous languages - a mantra that we have been hearing since 1994. It seems their users will continue using their languages in low functions, given the functional load of English in high functions and language domains related to these. A pity, otherwise one may simply accept that Afrikaans is the only truly African language that offers an alternative. But yeah, most definitely not a political correct stance. Anyway, we may all dream, I suppose?

[Reply](#)

Mashudu C Mashige

2022-03-07 at 14:27

Dear Theo du Plessis

Thank you for your sentiments which, on face value, are indeed valid. Yes, the genesis of our current dilemma started when Afrikaans was imposed on Learners as a preamble to the 1976 riots. Before then black people used their first languages to learn even mathematics. I personally did. It was only the misplaced notion that English would become a language of national unity among the oppressed and people fell for it hook, line and sinker without evidence that using Tshivenda, my own first language, to learn Mhala (Mathematics) would disadvantage us and hamper our educators changed to teaching in English

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[Ja](#) [Nee](#) [Koekiebeleid](#)

people were racist and oppressive but the language itself remains innocent as has become a ball for politicians and some sections of the Afrikaans to play ping-pong with. That infuriates me to no end.

Reply

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Reageer

Jou naam*

Jou e-posadres*

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

PLAAS

Stel my in kennis indien nuwe kommentaar bygevoeg word.

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