

BAQONDE and multilingual education in South Africa: An interview with Lorna Carson

Naomi Meyer, Lorna Carson

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BAQONDE

Learn in
Your Language



Bassey Antia (picture: <https://www.litnet.co.za/baqonde-boosting-the-use-of-african-language-in-education-an-interview-with-bassey-antia/>) and Lorna Carson (picture: <https://www.tcd.ie/slscs/staff/carsonle>); BAQONDE logo: <https://baqonde.usal.es/>

“Staat wil skole se taalbeleid bepaal” (“Government wants to lay down schools’ language policy”)

This was the headline on the front page of Rapport, the largest Afrikaans Sunday newspaper (and second largest Sunday newspaper in South Africa, after the Sunday Times), on Sunday 13 February.

Language often sells newspapers in this country. But maybe not all languages.

Language and the BAQONDE multilingual project were topics that Naomi Meyer, a few months ago, discussed with Bassey Antia of the University of the Western Cape – [read the interview here](#).

Naomi recently had a Zoom conversation to have further discussion on these topics, with Lorna Carson, head of the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences and professor in applied linguistics at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland.





Lorna Carson: photo - <https://www.tcd.ie/slscs/staff/carsonle>

Naomi Meyer (NM): Lorna, please tell our readers more about yourself: who you are, and about your background and your research.

Lorna Carson (LC): I am originally from Northern Ireland. As a child, I was a voracious reader, but I was also curious about other languages and the etymology of words. I couldn't articulate it when I was small. But, basically, I was interested from a young age, in Linguistics. I came to Dublin in the early 1990s to go to college. I did French and English at the university – Literature. I was exposed to the field of Linguistics: the area of study focusing on the systems we use in acquiring language, the comparisons and similarities between languages, like language typology. I got more involved with this, because my first job after my master's was in Brussels, where I was hired to work in a think tank and to work on a publication about elite multilingualism in Brussels. It was just a basic survey study. But, for me, there was already a finding there that we admire people who speak Italian and French and certain European languages.

NM: Do you think this is part of the problem of being a multilingual society: to learn a new language and to incorporate this language in real-life situations – it can be an effort?

LC: Yes, but it is more than that I think. I also realised then that it is all about power. The power of the speaker and of the state. Language is not about mere words.

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My realisation was that we are still upholding what is really a nineteenth century European-centric view of language where there is the idea of one language, one nation, one state. If you speak this one endorsed language, in a way you are swearing loyalty to the state and that's also how we know who you are.

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My realisation was that we are still upholding what is really a nineteenth century European-centric view of language where there is the idea of one language, one nation, one state. If you speak this one endorsed language, in a way you are swearing loyalty to the state and that's also how we know who you are. But even in the nineteenth century, all of those borders were all artificial and there were and are still hundreds of language varieties spoken outside of those official national languages.

NM: Also, one language can have many varieties – I'm thinking of Afrikaans here, as well, and Kaaps, to mention one of the varieties.

LC: Yes, and in fact linguists talk about language varieties rather than languages or dialects, because if we use those words it becomes politicised. And hundreds and hundreds of language varieties exist for example across Italy, France, England and other English-speaking countries, but because these have been classified as one standardised language, it leads to an embedded system of what is really a social hierarchy with financial implications...and implications about the varieties that matter and are worth learning, and the varieties that don't matter or matter less.

NM: I know that you have done research on the languages of migrant communities in Dublin.

LC: That's right. My own PhD was a study of adult refugees learning English in Ireland. Like all migrants, refugees come to a new country with so much to offer, including many languages. And yet, when it comes to policy, their languages are seen as a deficit, you know, an obstacle to get over. And for individuals who don't speak the language of their new host country, even though they are multilingual, and could be highly qualified as maybe a vet or a nurse or lawyer in another country, the immediate lack of the host country's language is immediately seen as the only problem.

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I became interested in how all the different language varieties in society interact: migrant languages, as well as all the different regional dialects and varieties of languages spoken in Europe, and of course the languages we learn in school too. When it comes to what are called regional and minority languages here in the European context, many of these languages are dying, not least because there are not enough resources available for these languages as well as the decline in speaker numbers. There aren't any opportunities to hear them spoken in a public forum or in the media in a meaningful way, and often they are just seen as decorative, a form of linguistic tokenism. But there is no meaningful engagement.

Another aspect I became intrigued in when I started off in this field twenty years ago, was the concept of language shift, especially what the linguist Joshua Fishman describes as intergenerational language shift. This is an especially important concept in a situation where language communities are jostling for geographical space, or power... The individual choices we make about language use now means that the next generations are impacted. So if you make a choice to only speak for example the main community language rather than a regional or minority language, or the migrant language that you speak as your mother tongue, to give your children a boost in a language that you think will give them the biggest access to jobs and money, that may in fact be at the cost of family relationships in the long-term. It is really a subtractive form of bilingualism or multilingualism, by stopping using one language and preferring the use of another. Those children may not learn the language of their parents in any meaningful way, and by the third generation there is a complete shift from Language X to Language Y. And by the fourth generation, Language X is in fact really no more than a heritage language that has to be learned from scratch.

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So language shift breaks down society, whereby the children in the third and fourth generations often cannot communicate with their grandparents in their first language. So on societal level, we are dealing with a loss of knowledge and relationships. It is really important to think of languages as not ... competing for space in our lives, but that they complement each other.

NM: So, when learning a new language ... where do you start?

LC: Children are sponges and they can easily acquire two, three, four languages simultaneously, and for various purposes. So if reasons are created to learn and use various languages, and multilingualism is valued, and you can live life in a meaningful way through the different languages in your repertoire, through, for example studying through it, or living part of your life through it, then that is the best way to help people maintain their languages. A languages through the lifespan approach, if you will.

Say, that it's seen as okay to speak the language your parents speak when you are in primary school, but when you move to secondary school you are only allowed to speak in the language of schooling, and the school polices that even during breaks ... it is really harmful. I have seen this happen in schools. These kind of practices keep individuals from flourishing. And it prevents society from becoming cohesive. Because it still sounds like those messages, that "some languages are more important than others" and "some languages are more prestigious than others" and "some languages are more useful than others" are being reinforced by different parts of society. One message that people take away is that ...you can't really do a third level degree in those languages, because those languages aren't up to the job, the language doesn't really have the words you need ... and then people think that the language itself, and therefore also its speakers, are not equipped to engage in the kind of higher order thinking required for third level study.

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NM: So, it is not just the language which has to be developed, but people's views on the speakers of the language (or languages)?

LC: Exactly. The idea behind this way of thinking ... that certain academic words can only exist in certain languages ... is: people tend to think a higher order thinking is therefore only possible in certain languages, like English and Afrikaans. But Swahili? I mean, can you learn enough in it ... can you do a degree through it, I mean really? "Oh, the language does not have the technical words ..." so there is a diminishing of the language by saying something like this. But in fact every language is able to convey higher order thinking, abstraction and so forth. Because the very nature of human language is that we acquire language because of our need make and convey meaning... to make ourselves known.

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It is only the local conditions that we impose on languages that prevent them from being recognised as such, our attitudes to language rather than the inherent properties of the language itself.

NM: Which other countries are involved in this project, and why?

LC: This programme is funded by the European Union's Erasmus programme (<https://baqonde.usal.es/management/>). I joined the project because of prior work with existing consortium co-ordinated by Salamanca University in Spain, we did a similar project together with Egyptian partners a few years ago. It was the XCELING project, with the goal of contributing to capacity-building in Applied in Egypt. (<https://xceling.usal.es>). I think this is my fourth project with Salamanca University, as a matter of fact. In the BAQONDE project, there are three European universities involved: Salamanca, Groningen and ourselves (Trinity College Dublin), together with four South African institutions (Rhodes University .NWU, UWC and KZN). In this network of partners we are sharing expertise and engaging in a two-way dialogue. Here in Trinity, we have certain expertise in, say, multilingual language learning, language technologies, the study of language policy, language learning through the life span. Our colleagues in South Africa bring their own linguistic expertise in this area as well as indigenous linguistic knowledge of all the different language varieties in their

territories, how these languages interact, and how the higher education sector context works. I suppose really in a project like this we swap knowledge and learn a lot from each other.

For example, a team of South African colleagues will be coming twice to Ireland, twice to the Netherlands ... and some of us will visit South Africa, too ... and there will be some training sessions and exchanges interactions where we try learn more about the multilingual situations in each partner's context. But ultimately these projects try to do something concrete, and to equip partners through what are described as a project's outputs or deliverables in a way that is research-led.

NM: What about the South African context? What do you think about mother tongue education in this country and the fact that most people do not become educated in their mother tongue?

LC: That's why, from the perspective of a linguist, the area of language planning and policy is so important.

Language planning looks at this kind of situation from the perspectives of status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning.

Status planning refers to policy tools and measures that allow a language to become, for example, an official language or a recognised language of schooling. Corpus planning activities equip a language for such purposes through, for instance materials such as books and dictionaries, as well as the creation of new words to meet the demands of technology, and acquisition planning ensures that there is a pathway or steps ... that regions are purposeful about how they support learning and speaking the language, that it is a language that is available in schools and universities. I think being aware of these components of language planning are very relevant to a project like BAQONDE, especially in the areas of corpus and acquisition planning.

So really, our mission is to foster conditions where students can access materials, resources and opportunities in their own language at university level, to learn in these languages. We are not re-inventing the wheel in terms of corpus planning for these languages. We are a small group of people in a time-limited project. But we are being purposeful and working to draw together existing work, to pull that work and resources together into a repository and to shine a light on it ...to help promote all the research that is being done in South Africa. And very often in a project like this ... because the languages are so different ... and there is a huge geographical spread as well ... People may not be aware what is going on between institutions, it is also a case of trying to gather and bring some of the knowledge together and I think this project provides a really good opportunity to do that.

So that is the thing to watch: bringing people together with the same mission. And the impact multiplies, because our contacts engage with their contacts, and so forth. Of course, we haven't been able to travel yet due to the pandemic, so it will be exciting when the face to face opportunities

start.

NM: While you were talking, Lorna, I thought about this. There is so much merit in everything you have said, but if people still stay in their bubbles, they still have the same perceptions about the various languages and what you can achieve if you speak a certain language.

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Indeed ... I also use the image of bubbles when I talk about multilingualism. We are all stuck in our own bubbles. Sometimes we are not even aware that we are in a bubble. We do not even know why we react in a certain way, and in fact most of us aren't very good at distinguishing between different languages or recognising them.

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LC: Indeed ... I also use the image of bubbles when I talk about multilingualism. We are all stuck in our own bubbles. Sometimes we are not even aware that we are in a bubble. We do not even know why we react in a certain way, and in fact most of us aren't very good at distinguishing between different languages or recognising them. But some people in some places are fearful if they hear Arabic, for example, because of the negative associations with the language, rather than positive associations as a language of poetry and comedy and so forth. We really tend to have stereotypical reactions about languages. And going back to that very first study I did ... when I investigated the language attitudes of those elite multilinguals who worked on a very high level at various European institutions. Even they held those kinds of views and had such stereotypical attitudes towards languages "German is so ugly", "French is lyrical" ... But ultimately these are human perceptions, socially formed perceptions rather than any innate characteristics of a language.

So, for me, in terms of the meaning behind all this I always say that in a nutshell, language learning changes lives for the better. I have yet to meet an individual whose life has contradicted that. Languages improve people's lives. Language learning is an opportunity to foster social cohesion, for our individual flourishing. That aspect of accessing all aspects of our human experience through our home language is enormously valuable. Society otherwise is very volatile ... and of course there is also the economic aspect of it and this is where governments should be interested. Yes, language skills are good for jobs. There are jobs for multilinguals around the world. Language is a form of human capital. And language capital is a source of enormous creativity, the interaction of different language communities in an open society leads to a high degree of creativity. It doesn't matter how you see that creativity ... fashion or art ... food or music. Language skills are important not just for big tech,

translations or customer support. Languages are integral to who we are. So thriving societies are societies where they invest money in all the languages spoken by their citizens ... rather than trying to shut them down. Or neglect them, as well.

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NM: Here we are: two people not speaking the languages the project wish to develop more. I, as a white South African, am aware of the fact that people need to speak their own truth, tell their own story in their own language. Can it be decided for people that their language should be developed into an academic language, or how does everyone involved in the project deal with this concept of agency?

LC: Yes, I'm very aware of that as a white native speaker of English for example, and a speaker of a variety of English that is prized by many. Often in this area, people talk about language rights, but really, languages themselves don't have rights – but speakers of those languages do have rights. Sometimes speech communities do not welcome initiatives that are foisted upon them. I think the best idea is that the speakers of the language are on board, and that they lead the change and the direction of travel. Because they are the ones who would have to be on board, on grassroots level.

Also, I suppose that question is not just about turning a language into an academic language, but also it is about communication between the different generations of the language speakers, it is about helping a language survive for future generations.

NM: Plenty of people in South Africa, from all cultural backgrounds, tend to switch to English instead of learning one another's languages. It is complicated over here. Afrikaans has been forced onto people in the past. But at the same time, Afrikaans has been developed into an academic language, and most Afrikaans speakers are not white. My personal view is that it will not help other African language grow when Afrikaans is neglected. All languages are equally important. All languages are valuable. Where do you start – from your point of view and from where you are watching this country – with other African languages? What can and should be done?

.C: Language is an emotional subject. But there is one simple thing that can be done immediately by all of us, every day.

Think about this. If you call someone by their name ... and you get their name right, and I mean say their name right, in their own language, the way their name is supposed to sound ... the way it should be pronounced, I think it is one of the most profound things we can do.

Take time to learn how to pronounce someone's name. Start there.

NM: Lorna, we have to finish – even though our conversation is not finished. Talking about finishing: when do you know when the project is finished? When the funding is stopped? Also: what is your personal vision for this BAQONDE project?

LC: So we have funding for three years, but in a project like this is always a sustainability plan. You want to set up conditions where the work continue afterwards. Very often, with these projects, you end up maintaining bilateral relationships with the partner institution, so practically speaking I hope that Prof. Bassey Antia and I will continue to collaborate in future. For instance, he is giving a talk virtually to our students in Trinity ...I think later this month.

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My vision? I think my vision for the project is that people ... students would have the opportunity to simply see their language represented in the university. That's the very first thing. Just see it.

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My vision? I think my vision for the project is that people ... students would have the opportunity to simply see their language represented in the university. That's the very first thing. Just see it. And that might just be that it's there on a list or a menu of class choices. That we continue to teach and teach through these languages at third level. It is also to make people realise: "My language is worth teaching." You know, it's got value.

And then the materials. Having a really good repository. Materials that would be online and usable, right across South Africa for the different subject areas. I think as well for parents of university students ... that they see that this is not a waste of time ...this is actually adding to your, I suppose, your capital. So that they won't say "oh, forget about that, let's focus only on English or your studies".

I would also like to see people creating using new technology to keep these languages visible, starting to use mobile apps, podcasts, in these languages That it would take on a life of its own, as well. And that universities would eventually have to catch up.

Even though the discussion wasn't finished, we had to finish the conversation. We did not discuss the immense socio-economic problems, and we only touched on the political and ideological baggage the various South African languages are burdened with.

But these invisible questions do not bother me as much as the invisible headlines this past Sunday.

After transcribing a recent Zoom interview with Lorna Carson, I can't help thinking about the newspaper headlines again.

“Staat wil skole se taalbeleid bepaal” (“Government wants to lay down schools’ language policy”)

I cannot help wondering: where are all the news headlines we never see? Could it be that the headlines regarding all the African languages in this country are invisible, because the languages themselves are not seen, are not recognised, the speakers not valued?

Also read:

[BAQONDE, boosting the use of African language in education: an interview with Bassey Antia](#)

[“In the belly of the beast”: South Africa’s education discourses associated with the fourth industrial revolution \(4IR\)](#)

[Universities as safe spaces: A student’s perspective](#)

[Pandemic tales: Making an educational life in a Stellenbosch University residence during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[Kaaps is the future of Afrikaans](#)

[Listening, not squabbling, builds academic communities](#)

[Stellenbosch language debate: Speech by David Jantjies at the DAK meeting with the SAHRC](#)

[Press release: The first trilingual dictionary of Kaaps](#)

[Eileen Pooe’s Setswana PhD: an interview in three languages](#)



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