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Diminishing the gains of African revolution - Post-colonial language teaching and the passion to mislead the African masses through miseducation

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Abstract

Throughout the ages, Africa is one continent on earth that endured the horrors of "the foulest and most soul-destroying tyranny which has ever darkened and stained the pages of history". It is that part of the world that had to withstand a "long night of barbarism, unbroken even by a star" (to use a Churchillian phrase) in the form of shame and servitude, slavery and colonialism. In its struggle for independence in the new millennium, Africa is still groaning under the unbearable load of abject poverty, starvation and incurable diseases. In the intellectual field, Africa is confronted by formidable challenges such as miseducation - a kind of scientific and technological control perpetuated by globalisation through learning and research institutions. A detailed picture of miseducation follows below.

Introduction Lest we forget, the aim of this conference is to "bring together as many language teaching professionals as possible from all levels, background and spheres in language learning in order to investigate and find solutions to the gaps and disparities between the requirements of one and the products of another."

For me, the above aim sounds like an implicit way of saying the language teaching in question is in fact English language teaching. One cannot interrogate the issue of language in the postcolonial South Africa, without English immediately bouncing into the picture, thus relegating the other ten national official languages into the backwoods of a linguistic jungle.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate why English enjoys greater status than any other official language, and why this language is given first preference at the time when statutory bodies like the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) are giving their time, energy and talent to developing and promoting the previously disadvantaged languages. Yes, why English in the first place? I intend to provide an answer to this question later on. For now, suffice it to say that it is all about power play.

My paper will move from the premise that the domineering nature of English, which verges on hegemony, is propelled by a powerful engine in the form of globalisation - capitalism with a difference. The dialect spoken by a king and his royal family is often selected for standardisation and codification as a national official language

of a speech community for a simple reason - a king is an all-powerful human being. By the same token, English is fast becoming the sole language for communication of the international world because its mother-tongue speakers are world leaders. And these are the people who would go out of their way to protect their own power.

No easy way to the top through English

Today African language departments in several tertiary institutions are facing an uncertain future as a result of the decline in the number of African students studying these languages. Speakers of indigenous languages will study only English, as they see it as a gateway to social and economic prestige. Dagut (2000:90) gives a moving example of how most Africans view English.

A Cape Town Xhosa-speaking parent, Patricia Njamalo, insisted that her four-year old daughter be prevented from speaking any language but English from her first day at preschool. She argued that "all you should be teaching them is how to be successful in a white man's world because they already know how to be black".

Despite positive attitudes by Africans towards English as revealed by the extract, African students are still taught only what is suitable to the fathers of globalisation. They are made to climb the socio-economic ladder through English up to a certain point.

Pennycook (1999:03) holds that "teachers colleges churn out more and more English teachers, quite frequently women in search of a skill in a labour market that they cannot enter in other capacities due to cultural and family constraints. Other language teachers, particularly Russian, face declining or near-extinct professional demand."

The decline in the number of students studying indigenous languages does not only contribute to the decadence of African languages, but also mean a loss of indigenous knowledge and indigenous teaching professionals.

English teaching and the politics of culture

In most tertiary institutions, English is taught merely as an exam-driven course - students are encouraged to strive for a pass mark so that they can be awarded their diplomas or degrees. English language teachers see themselves as technocrats with a mission to propagate English designed for Third World consumption. Factors such as culture have carefully been removed as components of the course. This method of teaching has a detrimental effect on African students studying English, because it does not equip them with cognitive thinking, creativity and open-mindedness, but fashions them as mere carriers of the language they don't fully understand. The point I am trying to make is that these students can never boast of being experts of English without the knowledge of the culture, traditions and customs of native speakers of English.

The word *culture* is one of the most abused words in the country; for this reason, clarification is needed here for us to understand my version of its meaning. By *culture* I refer to the great refinement, decency and a profound knowledge of one's lifeworld - the state of nature which a studious person attains on becoming a true scholar. And this includes a person's way of life, his mode of being.

This narrow approach in the teaching of English serves to reinforce the point I made earlier on about stagnating progress in our pursuit of sociolinguistic knowledge. Marzui (2004:54) has this to say about impediment of progress through miseducation:

The European languages like English in which Africans are taught, therefore, are potential sources of intellectual control. They aid the World Bank's attempt to expose Africans to get them to participate in the construction of knowledge that promotes the agenda of international capitalism. The hidden push for English, in particular, can be seen as part of a right-wing agenda intended to bring the world nearer to the "end of history" and to ensure the final victory of capitalism on a global scale.

It is not uncommon to hear linguistic parrots, agitators, "coconuts" and wanna-be Americans speaking English with a funny accent popularly known as "American" in African communities. Yet their knowledge of English does not go below the surface level. Perhaps one must add that it is one thing to be fluent in everyday language and another to possess a thorough knowledge of a language. Mphahlele (2004:07) points out that

because they have no mother-tongue training, the current learners of English lack conceptual dexterity. They fall for the simply Americanised street argot which, like, passes off, you know what I am saying, as the real McCoy.

Sharing the same views, Dagut (200:92) argues that

children's competence in conversational English is not necessarily always accompanied by comprehension of abstract or formally stated ideas. In the jargon field: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) does not imply Communicative Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

In my first year of English studies, I urged my lecturers in a lengthy letter to consider incorporating a cultural element in our course. A few days later I received a reply in the form of a tutorial letter (ENGALL-Y/314/1997) which reminded me of what I often hear in linguistic circles, that English is now a world language, a world property owned by those who speak it. In other words, English identifies itself with whatever culture of a speech community in the world. The embarrassment I might have caused with my unexpected letter to the lecturers is vividly revealed by Pennycook (1999:03) in the following lines:

English department faculties have a difficult time understanding why anyone should not wish to learn English. Questioning the function of English becomes professional existential self-negation, although raising such questions is necessary in educational systems where diverse populations perforce require multilingualism.

The fact that research has proven that culture, traditions and customs of the native English speakers can be instrumental in tearing the thick membrane of ignorance covering the mind of English students seems to be irrelevant to the most English teachers-cum-worshippers of globalisation.

Control of knowledge and skills

According to the South African Graduate Association (SAGDA 2005) there are, this year alone, 5 000 unemployed graduates flooding the job market in search of employment. And this does not include thousands of matric students jostling out of high schools and colleges to swell the ever-increasing population of the unemployed.

South Africa is blessed with a considerable number of high schools, a myriad of facilities, and improved matric results rates in recent years. However, Bisseker (2004:28) points to these matric results as an instance of the diminishing of educational gains by those who are supposed to multiply them. She said rather than seeing the improved results as a remarkable recovery in the education system, many saw only a watering down of standards.

For employers and universities, the rosy matric results fail to square with facts on the ground: the majority of matric students are unemployable as they leave school incompetent in maths and science, and barely equipped for further study.

Miseducation should take the whole blame for nurturing thousands of students into becoming unemployable and unmarketable job-seekers. The question we need to ask ourselves is, why would committed and responsible teachers allow students to leave school incompetent? What is the purpose of teaching in the first place? Is it not to train students to be competent? These unemployed graduates are simply the victims of miseducation, that is, the process of leading students astray from their pursuit of knowledge - the method used to control and protect knowledge and skills in order to perpetuate scientific and intellectual dependency on the part of the African people. The practice is reminiscent of Verwoerd's Bantu Education Policy (1954) which enabled Africans to perform only certain kinds of menial jobs such as gardening or kitchen work.

A leading character in *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), Arthur Jarvis, chimes in by saying, "we believe in the help of the underdog, but we want him to stay under." That is, however educated an African can be, he/she should, according to miseducation, remain an underdog. Mahmood Mamdani (quoted by Marzui 2004) reveals that "at a meeting in 1986, the World Bank argued that higher education in Africa was a luxury: that most African countries were better off closing universities at home and training graduates [abroad]."

Although we don't want to believe the World Bank's assertion, those who advocate miseducation compel us to see our universities as worthless when compared with the overseas ones.

Conclusion

De Klerk (1996:07) rightly asserts that the undying spirit for total liberation of African men and women has shifted from a political domain to a cultural battlefield. In South Africa languages have now become a terrain of struggle, a struggle over the basic human right to express oneself in one's mother tongue. It is all about self-worth and belonging and is underpinned by power: economic interests, political muscle and cultural concerns.

No nation on earth will be totally free unless it is able to express itself in its own language without outside linguistic interference. Language is a resource which articulates a nation's thought and expresses its identity. Robbing a nation of its language is tantamount to severing its tongue - thus making it a dumb or speechless person.

Language teaching is a sacred profession - a calling which should be executed with wisdom and compassion. For this reason, misleading students through language teaching should be made a crime punishable by expulsion from the profession as well as by annulment of the teaching diploma.

Some scholars have suggested that we must indigenise English - turn it into an African language. However, I respectfully submit

that Africa won't indigenise, localise or tame English, because the gods won't understand it anyway. The gods of Africa speak only indigenous languages, and nothing else.

It is not enough for us to decolonise the mind of an African, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) suggested, or to change the African's positive attitude towards English as Adebija (1994) said. The government needs to pump enough funds into the whole project of indigenous language teaching in order to develop and allow these languages to function economically and politically like English. Without financial assistance, teaching and developing indigenous languages will remain a pipe-dream.

Perhaps more vehement is the statement by Unisa vice-chancellor Professor Barney Pitso (2005:9), who calls for more investment in higher education in the country:

Higher education can never function in isolation from the challenges that society faces. (It) must be sustained by the good will of society. That society must express control in its capacity to produce public good, and to dream its future. Government has a vital role to play in creating that environment, by its public investment in higher education, by seeking and drawing together partners from the private sector, and by generating the confidence of society. Unless we do that, we should not be surprised that Africa does not feature among the 200 best universities of the world.

Let us not allow short-sightedness and ignorance to abuse our intellect and responsibility to educate, nurture and lead our youth to a prosperous future through committed, devoted and dedicated teaching. History will judge us harshly if we continue to mislead our future generation as a result of misguided and misinformed ideologies, greed and selfishness.

Inkomu. (Thank you for a fat calf.)

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