

# The challenge of language in post-apartheid South Africa

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## Introduction

The journey South Africa has travelled over the past few centuries is remarkable in very many different ways. From the early days of colonialism in the 17th century, the unfolding socio-historical scenery has been distinctively unique on this continent. Most of the attention of interested parties and observers has been focused on the political and economic implications of recent transformations in the country. In our lifetime, South Africa has been able to evade racial conflagration and establish the elements of a democratic order admired by many in the world.

With the successful institution of a system of universal adult suffrage in 1994, as South Africa moves cagily forward towards the consolidation of democracy and social justice, the legacy of the apartheid era in other dimensions of social life, which could in future compromise the gains of the present, will need increasing attention. These other dimensions include, prominently, the areas of culture in general and language in particular. It is useful to note that in many ways, the language question as part of the larger national question is not a problem limited to South African society alone. It is, indeed, a conundrum relevant to the whole of post-colonial Africa and undergirds the cultural edifice of neo-colonialism in contemporary Africa.

In present-day South Africa, the dominant cultures and languages remain Afrikaans and English, the languages of the socio-economically prevailing white minorities. In the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, English held the high ground, but by the 1960s and 1970s, steadily Afrikaans had almost reached parity in societal equality with English. The African languages have, throughout these periods, remained societally inferior and relatively insignificant. They are used almost exclusively in the domestic and informal domains in the social lives of African language speakers. Almost all formal education beyond the most elementary levels of schooling is conducted and instructed in English and Afrikaans. Less than 5% of the newsprint media is in African languages, and these are mostly in isiZulu, for example, *Ilanga* and *Isolezwe*.

**Table 1: Population by first language and province (percentage)**

Language (first)	WC	EC	NC	FS	KZN	NW	GP	MP	LP	SA
Afrikaans	49.7	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	24.7	78.8	5.3	7.5	3.4	5.5	6.6	1.2	0.4	16.0
IsiZulu	0.4	0.5	0.8	4.4	77.8	2.5	19.8	24.1	1.2	22.7
Sepedi	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	2.4	10.6	9.3	52.9	9.1
Sesotho	1.1	2.5	1.3	64.2	0.8	5.8	11.6	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	0.4	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	0.6	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	0.0	0.1	0.3	0.1	3.7	6.6	10.4	17.0	4.5
Other	2.2	0.6	1.1	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

NB: Unspecified and not applicable are excluded

More than half of the population of Northern Cape use Afrikaans as a first language.  
 Just under half of the population of the Western Cape speak Afrikaans as their first language and almost a quarter speak isiXhosa.  
 IsiXhosa is spoken as a first language by more than three quarters of the population in the Eastern Cape  
 IsiZulu is spoken as a first language by more than three quarters of the population in KwaZulu-Natal  
 More than six in ten people in North West speak Setswana, and more than six in ten in Free State speak Sesotho  
 In Limpopo, just over half the people speak Sepedi, followed by Xitsonga and Tshivenda  
 People in Gauteng and Mpumalanga speak a variety of languages as their first language]

**Source: Census 2011. In brief.**

Can South Africa move forward towards an era of flourishing democracy where the African languages of upwards of 80% of the population remain underprivileged and disempowered? How does the development question with regard to language relate to the need to deepen the culture of democracy? Can there ever be equality in South Africa without the elevation of the status of African languages to parity with Afrikaans and English? How would the development of African languages affect the existential conditions of the African language speakers in the country? This paper addresses the above issues.

## The linguistic ecology of South Africa

According to the findings of the 2011 census, isiZulu is the mother tongue for 22,7% of South Africa's population. This group is, in size, followed by isiXhosa speakers, whose portion stands at 16%; Afrikaans brings up 13,5%; English mother tongue speakers form 9,6%; Setswana speakers form 8% and Sesotho speakers form 7,6% of the population. The remaining official languages are spoken at home by less than 5% of the population in each instance.

Other indigenous African languages spoken here and mentioned in the constitution are the Khoe and San languages. These need to be empowered and officialised. There are also a few creolised and pidginised speech forms, including Fanagalo (the Zulu-based pidgin) and other hybrid speech forms. Some of these are jargons, such as Tsotsitaal. Besides these languages, many other languages – African, European and Asian – are spoken by small minorities in South Africa. Sign language is used by about 0,5% of the population, who, according to the results of the 2011 census, use sign language in the domestic domain. Mention must also be made of Arabic, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Portuguese, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu, spoken by small numbers scattered across the country.

According to the 2011 census, English is spoken as a home language by 9,6% of the population – only about a third of this portion are white. Therefore, white English home language or mother tongue speakers form less than 5% of the

whole South African population. South Africa's Asian people, most of whom are of Indian origin, are largely English-speaking, although a minority retain their languages of origin. There is also an increasingly significant group of Chinese South Africans, who are also largely English-speaking but retain their languages of origin. As a home language, English is most common in KwaZulu-Natal, where over a third of all English-speaking South Africans are found, making up 13,2% of the provincial population. Another third of English speakers live in Gauteng, where it is the language of 13,3% of the population. In the Western Cape, English is spoken by 20,2% of the population. Half of all Afrikaans speakers in the country are in the Western Cape, and less than half of all Afrikaans speakers are white.

Official understanding suggests that there are principally 16 prominent speech forms spoken in South Africa, together with Afrikaans and English. These, on the basis of linguistic criteria, can be clustered into five language groups, of which four are Bantu and one Khoesan. Of the 16, nine are official languages alongside English and Afrikaans. The nine indigenous official languages are distributed among four of the five language clusters, as follows:

- Nguni: isiZulu, isiXhosa, Siswati, isiNdebele
- Sotho-Tswana: Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi
- Changana-Tsonga: Xitsonga
- Venda: Tshivenda

All the nine indigenous languages that are officially designated as such are Bantu languages. Three are not official: Sebirwa, Xirhonga and Xitshwa. They are considered to be variants of one of the other nine official ones. Sebirwa is a variety of Sepedi, while Xirhonga and Xitshwa are varieties of Xitsonga. Khoesan languages spoken in South Africa include Kxoe (also spoken in Botswana, Namibia and Angola) and Khoekhoegowab (also spoken in Botswana and Namibia). None of the Khoesan languages are designated as an official language. Also, the South African sign language is not regarded as an official language. However, there have been steadily increasing calls for South African sign language to be elevated to the status of an official language. As already mentioned, this is among the most marginalised languages, not only in South Africa, but in the entire continent. Although South Africa is regarded by many to have the best language policy in the region, it has not accorded sign language an official status.<sup>1</sup>

### **The African language speaking groups**

Collectively, the African language speaking South Africans form about 80% of the overall population of South Africa. These were the original inhabitants of this part of Africa before the arrival of Western settlers. As indicated, most of them belong to two ethnolinguistic groups: the Nguni group, made up of Zulu, Ndebele and Xhosa, and the Sotho-Tswana group, made up of Pedi, Sotho and Tswana. In addition, there are smaller groups, like the Venda and Shangaan speakers. The smallest groups among the African language speakers are the Khoe and San communities. Members of all these African language speaking groups extend into adjacent countries in southern Africa. The degree of mutual intelligibility in the Nguni cluster is very high. So, also, is the case with the varieties in the Sotho-Tswana cluster. Indeed, the level of mutual intelligibility is so high that within these two clusters, the varieties can be regarded, for all practical purposes, as minor dialectal variants of “core languages” (Nguni and Sotho-Tswana).

It was the African language speaking groups in South Africa who were socio-economically the most deprived under the apartheid system. Under the system of institutionalised racism, these groups were largely segregated into territorially based units called Bantustans, which effectively split the groups up and disabled collective political action within the Bantustan arrangement. Although they were allowed to speak their languages in the Bantustans, in the urban areas the languages of power and state remained Afrikaans and English. Today, the languages you will hear most frequently spoken in South Africa depend on your location in the country. IsiXhosa is spoken by around 80% of South Africans in the Eastern Cape, while 78% of people in KwaZulu-Natal speak isiZulu. IsiZulu is also the most commonly spoken home language in Gauteng. In the Western and Northern Cape provinces, Afrikaans is predominant.

In the past, only English and Afrikaans were officially recognised as languages of learning and teaching. The current constitution of the Republic of South Africa, among other provisions, stipulates: “Everyone has the right to receive

education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable.” However, despite the fact that South Africa has 11 official languages, in practice, English and Afrikaans, the languages of the two white minorities in the country, still serve as the only effective official languages.<sup>2</sup> This is, indeed, an expression of the societal power of these two groups, and also dialectically a source of the societal power of the English and Afrikaans home language speakers. Ironically, throughout much of the history of South Africa, these two groups have been implacable rivals

### **The making of *taalstryd* and state power**

South Africa is home to one of the three universal linguistic miracles of the last hundred years. These three are Modern Hebrew, Bahasa (Indonesia and Malaysia) and Afrikaans. These languages have, over comparatively short periods of time, moved from linguistic rudiments of orality and unstable social bases to standardised usage with respectable scientific and technological lexicons and metalanguage, equal to any in the world and fully empowered to support a contemporary modern society. Africans, especially those in South Africa who today live with intellectually disempowered languages, do not have to look too far for an example of what is needed to lift Africans culturally and societally up by the bootstraps.

Dutch settlement in what became the Cape Colony started in the middle of the 17th century. For a good part of the next century, Dutch language and culture, although in a “transplanted” form, was maintained by the colonists. The *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), which was responsible for the establishment of the initial community, was, in its recruitment methods, not restricted to Dutch nationals. Thus, a century later, as a visitor observed, they had with time “intermingled to such an extent that it had become indistinguishable ... Even most of those who were born in Europe ... have, so to speak, exchanged their national character for the character of this country”.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, other factors which loosened the bonds between Europe and the colonists included the “infrequent traffic between the Cape and countries of origin, neglect of the colonists in administration, education and church matters, and an economic policy designed exclusively for the pursuit of the Company’s interests. All this fostered individualism and a sense of independence, economic self-sufficiency and the development of a new language that was no longer pure Dutch and was to become Afrikaans”.<sup>4</sup> Crucial to the development of the language was the fact that the colonists brought in labour from West Africa, East Africa and the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago as slaves, in preference to the local African Khoen and San people, under the auspices of the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) – who, in order to communicate with their masters and mistresses, creatively adapted Dutch. This patois developed to become a lingua franca which was popularly described as “*kombuistaa*” – kitchen language. It served as the emergent creolised Dutch in the Western Cape. It is only in recent years that the servants’ and slaves’ parenthood of Afrikaans has been recognised in South Africa. Lexically, it is principally a version of Old Dutch.

In the beginning of the 19th century, as the English settlers challenged the Dutch for dominance in southern Africa, language became a vocal point of tensions between the Dutch and the English. These tensions became particularly acute after the Napoleonic Wars. The English, from the second decade of the 19th century, endeavoured to anglicise the Dutch culturally. Indeed, this was one of the principal underlying factors in the emergence of the *trekboer* phenomenon, where Dutch settlers moved away from the areas of British dominance and control in the Cape. Shortly after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, English was declared the official language of the Cape Colony (in 1822), replacing Dutch. The stated language policy of the government of the time was one of anglicisation. On the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which united the former Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State with the Cape and Natal colonies, English was made the official language together with Dutch. This latter was replaced by Afrikaans in 1925.

Running through the whole of the 19th century, the English and Dutch settlers were in regular tension over cultural and other matters. The administration of Lord Milner towards the end of the 19th century saw a period of persistence of British attempts to impose English on the Dutch settlers. This factor was the cultural dimension of the tensions which led to the Anglo-Boer War. The British were outspoken about their intentions. EB Sargent, who was in charge of education in the Transvaal and the Free State, in a revealing letter written on 3 June 1901 to Milner, suggested: “We

must appeal to England, and ask the sisters and daughters of those who have been fighting for the Empire to come out and complete that part of the work which their male relatives are unable to accomplish. Our military police had gathered the greater part of the child population into these camps and ... I feel that the opportunity during the next year of getting them all to speak English is golden.”<sup>5</sup> Milner, who was British proconsul in South Africa, was even more forthright in the expression of his views on the question. On 13 September 1901, he said: “My idea is that the formula, ‘The presumption must always be in favour of English, with permissive Dutch where practical convenience demands it’, will take us a long way. I have no idea whatever to admit equality of languages, and I hope there will be little trouble in making English the language of the Courts, Schools and Parliament, but always with a tolerance of Dutch as long as necessary.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the last quarter of the 19th century and the two opening decades of the 20th century were decisive for the emergence of Afrikaans as an independent language separate from Dutch, and the conceptualisation of the Afrikaner went on hand in hand with the language struggle (*taalstryd*). In 1875, the *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* (Society of True Afrikaners) was formed as the core organisation for the national emergence of Afrikanerdom. The publications *De Zuid-Afrikaan* and *Die Afrikaans Patriot* became organs of this growing national consciousness. In the negotiations and proceedings preceding the union of South Africa, notable Afrikaans leaders like JBM Hertzog and Martinus Steyn made it clear there was no room for compromise on the language question. Afrikaners wanted full official equality between English and Afrikaans if union was to materialise. So adamant and suspicious was Steyn, that he originally did not want to be part of the convention in case their position on the matter was denied. Only the assurances of General Botha convinced him to agree to be part of the proceedings. At the sitting of the convention on 19 October 1908, Steyn and Hertzog made their case. Hertzog pointed out that Afrikaners would not acknowledge the Union unless there was complete equality in the status of English and Afrikaans.<sup>7</sup>

After the establishment of the Union in 1910, the Afrikaners continued to make the question of language a prime issue in negotiations with the British. The matter was not closed until 1925. Within three years of the establishment of the Union, in 1913, the Afrikaners standardised their language. That same year, it was introduced into primary school education. The Afrikaners were very conscious of the need to reject the hegemony of English and preserve their identity through language in the form of the new neo-Dutch, called Afrikaans. In 1918, Afrikaans was accepted in the university as a standardised language of instruction. In 1925, Afrikaans was adopted in Parliament as an official language. In 1933, the first Afrikaans Bible was produced, and within 15 years of that, Afrikaans had become a language in which it was possible to study anything under the sun. The 1920s were years of intense activity towards terminology development, metalanguage and the publication of scores of books for all levels of the educational system and for more popular usage.

By the time the Afrikaners came to power as the National Party in 1948 and instituted the apartheid system, the status of Afrikaans as a language of science and technology was more or less acknowledged by all. Although the British regarded Afrikaans as an inferior and derisory cultural phenomenon, Afrikaans had become a respected language in its own terms and, in the interest of its constituency, an adequate language for education at all levels. The 1950s were years of consolidation and sociological entrenchment of Afrikaans in South Africa. The self-assertiveness and single-minded advancement of Afrikaner interest was matched by even greater usage of Afrikaans as a language of communication in the country. Political power had become an instrument for the advancement of the status of the language, and dialectically the rising status of the language meant that the constituency was being socio-politically strengthened. This was very much in line with the idea expressed by the leader of the Afrikaners in the post-1948 period, that, “raise the Afrikaans language to a written language, let it become the vehicle for our culture, our history, our national ideals, and you will also raise the people who speak it ... The Afrikaans Language Movement is nothing less than an awakening of our nation to self-awareness and to the vocation of adopting a more worthy position in world civilisation”.<sup>8</sup> This observation by DF Malan, made in 1908, was socio-linguistically sound because, in order to empower Afrikaners in the face of English hegemony, it was necessary to empower the language through intellectualisation and wider social usage. This issue was very well understood by a great number of the Afrikaans leadership through their long tradition of resistance against the domination of English in the 19th century.

After the establishment of apartheid in 1948, the Nationalist Party proceeded to Afrikanerise the state. The civil service and other organs of the state were filled with increasing numbers of Afrikaners. More and more official business was conducted in Afrikaans, where English had previously been preferred. From the late 1950s onwards, the steady drive towards imposing Afrikaans hegemony was intensified. The Bantu Education Act of 1953, the Coloured Persons Education Act of 1963, and the 1965 Indian Education Act in stages compartmentalised education in South Africa on sealed racist bases. By the '60s, the state had become fairly predominantly Afrikaner in character, and the use of the language in all areas of the state had become prevalent. In education, up to tertiary level, Afrikaans-based institutions could rival English-based institutions in all respects. Resources were ensured to support Afrikaans education to an equal degree to English. The increasing power of the Afrikaner establishment was backed up by a strong state, which stamped on any attempt to upset the applecart of Afrikaner dominance. The government was spending far more on white education than on black education: R644 was spent annually for each white student, while only R42 was budgeted for a black schoolchild.

By the early '70s, attempts to push Afrikaans into African schools had assumed definite proportions, and frustration was building up in African communities regarding the overwhelming pre-eminence of Afrikaans above English. Africans were encouraged to use their Bantustan languages, but this was done in a way which belittled and disempowered the African languages by providing them poor and only rudimentary support. This situation finally led to the explosion which occurred in Soweto on 16 June 1976, when African schoolchildren, mainly based in Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto, refused to be taught in Afrikaans as a language of instruction.

I was fortunate, in the beginning of July 1976, to meet with the then youngsters who had left South Africa in numbers to go into exile in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and beyond. In Botswana, I met the leader of the revolt of 16 June in the Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto, Tsietsi Mashinini, and had the opportunity of interviewing and recording him at great length about the uprising. He indicated that Afrikaans had become, in their consideration, an intensely reviled medium, directly identified with the oppression in the country. It was a language they did not want to hear or, above all, be taught in. He also explained that the uprising was not instigated by either the African National Congress (ANC) or the Pan African Congress (PAC), but rather that their sympathies were closest to the black consciousness organisations in the country. The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and its allies, the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and the South African Students Movement's action committee, were organisationally and ideologically in the vanguard of the uprising. These were the organisations which were active in their circles, the organisations they knew.

The Soweto uprising was a turning point not only politically in South Africa, but also linguistically. It marked the beginnings of the end of Afrikaans hegemony, which had been on the rise from 1948. The road travelled from 1976 to 1994 was politically that of a slowly unravelling Afrikaner power grip over the state, and the beginnings of discussions regarding the foundations for a more emancipated and more democratic order in the country. The insurgent social groups were largely focused on the conquest of political power rather than cultural concerns. Where these concerns existed, they implicitly were directed towards the practical replacement of Afrikaans language supremacy with English. The rest of the groups of the prospective "rainbow nation" addressed their linguistic concerns in generalised and bald terms.

## **Other minorities**

The so-called coloured people of South Africa, who are of mixed historical derivations, are mainly concentrated in the Western Cape and are predominantly Afrikaans. Historically and currently, the bulk of the socio-cultural substratum of this group is mainly Khoen and San, with a strong Malay and European settler admixture. The Khoen and San groups, which are today principally in some areas in the Northern Cape, are to a considerable extent culturally Afrikanerised and merged into the coloured community of the Western Cape. There is also an admixture of the Xhosa and other African language speaking groups in the making of the coloured community. In a cultural or, more specifically, linguistic sense, they are effectively either Afrikaners or English. Indeed, it is within the Afrikaans coloured community that the vibrancy of the Afrikaans language today is most manifested.<sup>9</sup> Lexically, it is the most creative part of the Afrikaans community, and from "*straatpraatjies*"<sup>10</sup> to highbrow Afrikaans, it is possible to identify people in this community who are

best examples of these linguistic features. The same can be said for the so-called coloureds who are English-speaking. What is, however, noticeable, particularly in the Western Cape, is that Afrikaans-speaking coloureds are regarded, in terms of status, by English-speaking coloureds as socially inferior. The elites among coloureds are mainly Anglophile.<sup>11</sup> As Richard van der Ross pointed out some years ago, this is because “for many years English was the language of the more sophisticated coloured person, and today it is probably still the case with most of the educated, urban coloured people. There are historical and other reasons for this. One important reason is that English was the language of the business world. If one wanted a good position in the city, one had to be able to speak English. The first high schools were English-medium, as were the only universities which coloured people attended in any numbers worth mentioning, ie the University of Cape Town and the University College of Fort Hare. It is also possible that the negative attitude of leaders such as Dr Abdurahman, who regarded the Afrikaans language as a mere patois and frequently belittled it, also led to an anti-Afrikaans attitude taking root among the more sophisticated coloured people. English was the status language, the language of learning, the language of literature and of commerce, the language of the overlord”.<sup>12</sup> Another important feature of the coloured communities of the Western Cape is that a sizeable proportion of them, mainly those whose antecedents derived from the Malay slave patrimony, form a fairly distinct cultural group within the larger community. Within the larger community, it is the Muslim/Malay subset who appear to be most successful as businessmen and entrepreneurs.

I have elsewhere observed that since the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, noticeably, there has been an increasing self-consciousness and historical soul-searching among the so-called coloured people of the Western Cape. This process of self-discovery has, in the early years of the post-apartheid era, been typified by the strong sentiments which were expressed most trenchantly for the return of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called “Hottentot Venus”, and the emergence of claims for the recognition of chieftaincy and captaincy among groups in the Northern Cape who were, in the previous administration, characterised as coloureds.<sup>13</sup> Part of this movement and process can be characterised as Africanist, in the sense that it attempts to reclaim the African historical and cultural roots of the people of the Western Cape, who, since the beginnings of the Western encounter, have been in various ways steadily culturally denationalised, and in most senses Afrikanerised. In the words of Zenzile Khoisan, one of the most eloquent advocates of the movement, the prime object is to reclaim African culture and history among the people of Khoesan descent; the movement is to stem and arrest the process of “cultural strip-mining” which has gone on for centuries against the Khoesan people in this part of Africa.<sup>14</sup> Zenzile Khoisan adds that “most of the people who currently form part of this movement, especially the linguistic aspects, grew up speaking Afrikaans (colonial/post-colonial situation). The movement will, in effect, dignify the progeny of the Khoesan through a process of reconstruction and restoration of the most important aspect of the communicative tradition, which is the tongue of their forebears ... A people without a tongue, that is, a line to their ancestral heritage, are people that are dumb”.<sup>15</sup> To this, Willa Boesak adds that “with the rediscovery of Khoesan roots, we must also rediscover our language”.<sup>16</sup>

Cheryl Hendricks, in an interview, suggested that the politico-cultural movements that have emerged in the Western Cape since 1994 can be broadly placed into two categories. On the left are those tendencies which advance a broadly Africanist discourse. To the right are those tendencies which lean on exclusivist colouredism – the sort of mental turn which argues that “we are unique” or “we are the only true South Africans”.<sup>17</sup> Hendricks also perceptively observes that “identities are claimed as instruments for particular objectives which may be different from what is publicly espoused”. Hendricks’s perspective is attractive and locates identity shifts and trajectories within the ambit of class dynamics. In her view, the coloured masses of the Western Cape are not particularly bothered by identity issues. These issues are problems of the more socio-economically fortunate classes who want a better stake in the existing order.<sup>18</sup> Willa Boesak disputes this argument. In his view, “many ordinary people were at our meetings and want to learn the Nama language”.<sup>19</sup> In South Africa, over the past 40 to 50 years, languages like Korana, Nghuki, Seroa, //Xam, //Xegwi, and Xiri have become extinct. All these languages are Khoesan. Possibly, during the next hundred years, between 50% and 90% of the speech forms known to the world today will disappear. Under these circumstances, any language whose use shows signs of revival and popular resurgence needs to be encouraged and supported.<sup>20</sup>

## The Indians of South Africa

South Africans of Indian descent form the smallest minority (2,5%) of the population among the principal groups in South African society. From the earliest years of Dutch settlement in the Western Cape, Indian slaves, a good number Muslims, were brought in from Bengal (including Bihar and Orissa), Coromandel (especially Tranquebar, Tuticorin, Nagapattinam, Calicut and Masulipatnam) and Malabar (including Goa, Bombay and Surat). They were imported in small numbers to labour for their Dutch masters.

Today, the larger numbers are concentrated mainly in KwaZulu-Natal, on the east coast, where they were originally brought as indentured labourers under British administration between 1860 and 1911, to work mainly in the sugar cane fields of Natal. They were drawn pre-eminently from southern India, and were for the most Tamil and Telugu speakers. Today, their community represents the largest Indian diaspora outside India. Their cultural features have also been considerably eroded through loss of their original languages. A small minority of the older generation speak some Indian languages, but the younger generation has lost this ability. So, although they maintain some cultural symbols like Diwali, prayers and funeral rites indicating their cultural and historical origins in India, they have been largely culturally effaced and have become mainly English-speaking. Also within the Indian community, there is a Muslim component, but the Muslims, Hindus and Christians who form the Indian community have all become increasingly linguistically and culturally anglicised.

## **Multilingualism**

Most South Africans speak more than one language. This reality is particularly prevalent among African language speakers. This is particularly striking in the urban areas, where in cities like Johannesburg (Gauteng), Nairobi, Lagos, Kinshasa, Accra, Lusaka, etc, multilingualism is noticeably growing.<sup>21</sup> Pulled and pushed out of their traditional comfort zones in the rural areas in search of wages in the cash economy, and thrown together by social forces beyond their control into poor, incommensurate urban settings, people – particularly children – quickly learn the languages of their playmates and neighbours, and grow into adulthood with mastery of many of the languages they hear around them.

This multilingual trend has become a distinct advantage facilitating social intercourse in a multicultural setting. In South Africa, the growth-point of multilingualism is most prominent among African language speakers. But, it is almost overwhelmingly an orally based multilingualism.

## **Concluding observations**

South African society displays some of the most technologically and scientifically advanced features of a modern society found anywhere in the world. It is distinctly, in this respect, ahead of any of the other countries on the African continent today. But, this material culture of modernity is based exclusively on the cultures of the two white minority groups in the country. The other ethnolinguistic groups are not part of the knowledge-producing socio-cultural elements of the society. In the print media, over 80% of the output is also grounded in the languages of the two white minorities, that is, English and Afrikaans. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see how the culture of participant democracy can be more fully developed. In a society where the overwhelming majority have no access to newspapers in their own languages – the languages they speak and understand – it is difficult to see how their involvement in the political democracy of the society can be realised.

These problems extend into education and access to general information in the society. The virtual exclusion of the overwhelming majority of the people from the communications of officialdom imposes a condition of cultural and social inferiority on the majority of the citizenry. These challenges and issues require the attention of all interested parties as the society moves forward in the 21st century.

It was an enormous milestone to achieve an end to the apartheid era, but how we move forward in the efforts to consolidate democracy, human rights, economic and social justice and a level playing field in all respects for all members of the citizenry will depend greatly on how these linguistic challenges are addressed. In as far as the languages of the native peoples of South Africa remain overwhelmingly oral in usage, with little or no scope for

intellectualisation, their users will remain culturally backward in comparison with their English and Afrikaans fellow citizens who are the progeny of the colonial settlers. These latter, in an economic, social and cultural sense, remain dominant in the current order. The “national question”, the ability of the socio-cultural majority to assert itself, is for now circumstantially debarred. This situation of internal cultural colonialism will continue to constrain the fuller development and growth of democracy in the country.

The intellectualisation and development of African languages will give confidence, and enable greater participation and better civic engagement. It will provide a basis for the whole society to participate in the processes of knowledge creation and reproduction. It will also empower African language speakers to uplift their communities from bottom up. In a society where they are historically socio-economically at the bottom of the heap, their societal progress will mean progress of the society as a whole.

Such progress must be understood as a prerequisite for the emancipation of mass society in South Africa. Freedom and emancipation cannot be interpreted purely as the right to vote. It must also be understood as the expansion of the scope for people societally to increase their range of possibilities for deploying their talents more comprehensively. Seen in this light, the challenges of the language question in South Africa, as is the case in most of Africa, require approaches which improve the capacity for people effectively to use their talents and qualities more profitably. This is the direction which the universal emancipation process of humanity has been moving.

It is generally observed that African language speakers do not regard their languages as languages of advancement and development. The perception exists very rampantly that African languages are of little use, cannot be developed and are not economically beneficial; in short, they cannot be modernised. These prejudiced attitudes persist and are rife in African language speaking communities. What is crucial is that whichever language development strategies are deployed to enhance and intellectualise African languages, a central consideration which needs to be borne in mind is that, ultimately, we must be able to make the use of these languages economically profitable and societally beneficial. If the economics of the development and use of African languages is growth-oriented, the social attitudes constraining the development of African languages will be readily discarded by African language speakers.

In late 2015 and early 2016, when across the country students embarked on the #Rhodesmustfall campaign which started at the University of Cape Town, at the University of Stellenbosch the campaign took a direction towards the phasing out of Afrikaans in favour of English as language of instruction. What was remarkable throughout this campaign was that there was hardly any mention of the possibility for students to utilise African languages as languages of education and instruction.

There is generally a robust recognition among white Afrikaans language speakers of the value and importance of the language in their social lives. This provided from the start the basis for the national consciousness which has characterised Afrikaner nationalism from its early beginnings in the 19th century. However, steadfast determination characterised the Afrikaner’s approach from the time of the emergence of a standardised Afrikaans orthography in 1913. In two decades, by the mid-1930s, the language was fully intellectualised. In all the stages of swift advancement, the preferred variety of Afrikaans was the speech form found in the Transvaal and Orange Free State, as opposed to the other varieties of the language, particularly the version spoken in the Western Cape by the masses of coloured people (*Kaaps*).

*Kaaps* is, indeed, the most fecund centre of Afrikaans. It is the most dynamic and lexically creative variety among the variants. In 2011, the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) organised a workshop on the need to mainstream the regional Afrikaans varieties in the construction and development of the standard. The argument was very easily appreciated by the custodians of the Afrikaans language (Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns). They were quick to award the CL Engelbrecht Prize for 2015 to the book that emerged out of the workshop.<sup>22</sup> The language consciousness which white Afrikaans speakers have, and the pride and valuation they place on their language, are lacking in the case of African language speakers, not only in South Africa, but in the rest of the continent.<sup>23</sup>

Not too long ago (2015), I drew attention to earlier historical diagnosis of the prime challenge facing African languages in South Africa in a paper which, in part, dealt with the legacy of Jacob Nhlapo.<sup>24</sup> I drew attention to the fact that Nhlapo was the first to draw attention to the need to harmonise the Nguni languages and the Sotho-Tswana languages into two orthographically justified scripts. In the foreword to the first book published in the CASAS book series, Govan Mbeki wrote that “way back in the ’40s and ’50s, Dr Jacob Nhlapo, who was then the editor of the *Bantu World*, was obsessed with the idea of developing only two African languages in South Africa. He argued, on the one hand, that the relationship between the Nguni languages – Xhosa, Zulu, Shangaan, Ndebele and others – was so close that they could be merged to form one language, and, on the other hand, that the Sotho group – Southern Sotho, Sepedi, Northern Sotho and Setswana, for example – could form another block. The various national languages of South Africa could thus be reduced to no more than four or five. As editor of the *Bantu World*, he placed in every issue of that paper an article related to the unification of these languages. After his death, that debate went into the grave with him”.<sup>25</sup> Govan Mbeki’s celebration of the Nhlapo thesis restores to life the idea. In a dialogue with Mbete in 1999, he indicated that Nhlapo had been making this point as far back as 1932. It is interesting to note – as Stan Ridge also pointed out in an article from 1935 – Louw and Doke, at a conference in July 1934 under the auspices of the New Education Fellowship with the theme “Educational adaptations in a changing society”, had pleaded for the harmonisation of the South African languages. Nearer our times, Neville Alexander also reminded South Africans of the relevance of the Nhlapo thesis for the present period.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, the global experience of humanity points to the need to use our native languages for African progress. If this is the case, the indigenous South African languages have to be at the centre of the process and be utilised in the transformation of South Africa en route to modernity; the whole approach needs to be undergirded by economic rationality and the overall cultural empowerment of the masses. Literacy in the indigenous African languages is, needless to say, crucial. For, without literacy in the languages of the masses, science and technology cannot be culturally owned by Africans. Africans will remain mere consumers, incapable of creating competitive goods, services and value-additions in this era of globalisation.<sup>27</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> L Miti. *Language rights in southern Africa*. CASAS book series. No 18. Cape Town. 2016. Pp 15–6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> JS Stavorinus. *Reize van Zeeland over de Kaap de Goede Hoop*. Houkoop. Leyden. P 309. Quoted here from H Giliomee. “The development of the Afrikaner’s self-concept”. In: HW van der Merwe. *Looking at the Afrikaner today*. Tafelberg. Cape Town. 1975. Pp 8–9.

<sup>4</sup> H Giliomee. Ibid. P 9.

<sup>5</sup> JC Steyn. *Die taalstryd na die Anglo-Boereoorlog*. LitNet. TaalDebat. <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/taaldebat/steynjc2.asp>

<sup>6</sup> JC Steyn. Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> JC Steyn. Ibid. He adds that “... Pres Steyn het gesê dat hy gelykheid van die twee tale nie as guns vra nie, maar as reg. 'Hollands was in die verlede op die een of ander tyd die offisiële taal van al die kolonies. [...] Ons taal het sy offisiële karakter alleen deur geweld verloor. Voor geweld moes ons swig. Die Konstitusie wat ons nou gaan opstel, sal ons eie daad wees, en niemand kan verwag dat ons vanself ons taal en ons volk in ’n onderdanige posisie sal gaan plaas nie. As ons dit sou doen, sal die volk nimmer sy goedkeuring daaraan heg nie, en in plaas van vereniging sal ons Suid-Afrika nog meer verdeel.’ Die volgende dag (20 Oktober 1908) het die Konvensie besluit dat Engels en Hollands die amptelike tale van die Unie sou wees. Die bepaling watter tale ampstale is, is op 20 September 1909 vasgelê in die 'South Africa Act / An Act to constitute the Union of South Africa', ’n wet van die Britse Parlement. Die ampstale sou

'both the English and Dutch languages' wees. In die amptelike vertaling van die 'Zuid-Afrika Wet' is 'Dutch' deur 'Hollands' vertaal: 'De engelse asmede de hollandse talen zijn officiële talen van de Unie'. Die erkenning van 'Hollands' was van groot betekenis vir die toekoms. In 1925 is wetlik bepaal dat dié benaming ook Afrikaans insluit ..."

<sup>8</sup> SW Pienaar (ed). *Glo in u volk: Dr DF Malan as redenaar. 1908–1954*. Tafelberg. Cape Town. 1964. P 175.

<sup>9</sup> Most Afrikaans speakers live in the Western Cape, where it is the language of just less than half (48,4%) of the provincial population. It is also common in Gauteng, where 12,2% of the provincial population consider Afrikaans to be their home language. Afrikaans is the dominant language in the Northern Cape, spoken by more than half (53%) of the provincial population. Afrikaans is spoken by 12,4% of the Free State's population, 10,4% of the people of the Eastern Cape, and 8,8% of the people of North West.

<sup>10</sup> Richard van der Ross. *In our own skins. A political history of the coloured people*. Jonathan Ball Publishers. Johannesburg. 2015. P 65.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> RE van der Ross. "Afrikaners as seen by coloured people". In: Hendrik van der Merwe. *Looking at the Afrikaner today*. Tafelberg. 1975. P 59.

<sup>13</sup> See KK Prah. *Silenced voices*.

<sup>14</sup> Recorded conversations: Zenzile Khoesan and Kwesi Kwaa Prah. Cape Town. 7 November 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Telephonic interview: Willa Boesak. 8 May 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Interview: Cheryl Hendricks. Cape Town. 3 May 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. See also Cheryl Hendricks. "The burdens of the past and challenges of the present: coloured identity and the rainbow nation" (mimeo). Undated.

<sup>19</sup> Willa Boesak. Op cit.

<sup>20</sup> Op cit, KK Prah. *Silenced voices*. P 145.

<sup>21</sup> See KK Prah. "A tale of two cities: trends in multilingualism in two African cities. The cases of Nima-Accra and Katutura-Windhoek". In: KK Prah and Birgit Brock-Utne (eds). *Multilingualism an African advantage*. CASAS book series. No 67. Cape Town. Pp 250–74.

<sup>22</sup> KK Prah (ed). *Veelkantiger Afrikaans. Streeksvarieteite in die Standaardvorming*. CASAS book series. No 88. The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS). Cape Town. 2012.

<sup>23</sup> In 2015–2016, I was involved with Ghanaian institutions for the development of a language policy for Ghana. Interestingly, 60 years after independence, the draft which was drawn up was fully directed strategically towards the preservation of the hegemony of English. Tanzania appears to have broken the mould in 2015, when the authorities decided that Kiswahili should be utilised at all levels of education.

<sup>24</sup> KK Prah. *Nithini ngolwimi iwethu? Challenges to the promotion of indigenous languages in South Africa*. CASAS monograph. No 262. The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS). Cape Town. 2015. P 37.

<sup>25</sup> See Govan Mbeki. "Foreword: the relevance of African languages for education and development". In: KK Prah (ed). *Between distinction and extinction*. CASAS book series. No 1. Witwatersrand University Press. Johannesburg. 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Op cit. KK Prah. "Nithini ngolwimi iwethu?" Pp 37–8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

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## Comments

Theodorus du Plessis

2018-03-22 at 11:43

'n Sober en tydige oorsig noudat ons Departement Hoëronderwys en Opleiding se voorgestelde hersiene taalbeleid vir hoëronderwys juis meer prominensie aan die sogenaamde Afrikatale wil verleen. Maar hoe prysenswaardig ook al, dit bly 'n grafgrawer-benadering - van boontoe ondertoe. Wanneer sal ons onderwysowerhede dus ag begin slaan op prof Prah se slotsom omtrent akademiese geletterdheid en 'n magtige poging aanwend om die nodige regstellings van onder af, met ander woorde vanaf die grondslagfase, te bewerkstellig? Is dit nie die konvensionele manier om 'n huis te bou nie?

Reply

rose jackson

2018-03-26 at 17:56

A timely article, making some valid points. But I find it historically somewhat shaky/superficial and selective. I just happen to be editing a chapter of a book on SA education (historical) on S Mqhayi - his role - based on his experience/identity as imbongi, writer (literary, newspaper + Xhosa readers for Lovedale Press), social/political activist and educationist/educator in negotiating a complex/mined field of missionary and colonial education (and Lovedale Press) in early 20th century. This KK Prah omits that whole chapter of education in E Cape in late 19th/early 20th centuries: the role of the missionaries, colonial/Cape government/education department, and the Black/Xhosa elite, and the COMPLEXITIES of identity, culture and language! The politics - the CONTESTED area -of orthographies ... etc.

Reply

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Reageer

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Stel my in kennis indien nuwe kommentaar bygevoeg word.