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From racial to linguistic capitalism?

Gerrit Brand

Ten years after the end of apartheid, and with the third democratic election behind us, many analysts have been trying to come to grips with the nature of South Africa's transition since 1994. Authors like Neville Alexander, Vincent Maphai, Allister Sparks and Sampie Terreblanche have produced important publications in which the "miracle" of our transition is analysed from various perspectives. With the ANC now in government for a third term, and the beginning of President Thabo Mbeki's final term as head of state, the time has come to take stock of issues and problems hitherto neglected in most analyses of the transition, so that they can be recognised and tackled in the period that lies ahead.

One such neglected issue is that of language as a question of national policy. Of the authors mentioned, only Alexander recognises the importance of the politics of language for the future of our society, and in the speeches of political leaders, including the president, it has received scant, and mostly superficial, attention. Yet a thorough analysis of developments over the last decade, against the background of 300 years of colonialism, segregation and apartheid, suggests that language is one of the pivotal factors that will determine the direction in which our society will develop.

To see this, one simply needs to compare the percentage of South Africans who are functionally proficient in English — just over half of the total population, according to a 2000 Markinor survey — with the percentages in sectors like government, the civil service, higher education institutions, and the private sector. While these and other high-status sectors have become much more representative of the total population in racial terms over the past decade, it is quite evident that South Africans who are proficient in English, regardless of race, are dramatically over-represented in each of them.

The significance of this discrepancy begins to emerge only when we consider that South Africans' relation to the English language corresponds strongly with various other markers of relative social status and power bequeathed by our history, such as class, gender, urban versus rural origin, and — yes — race. The Markinor survey already referred to showed quite clearly that the more light-skinned, wealthy and urban one is, the more likely one is to be proficient in English. Take for instance the finding that, whereas about 60% of all South Africans regard themselves as proficient in English, this figure drops to only 22% in the case of speakers of African languages, i.e. more than 70% of the population. A language barrier with English as the main criterion of access thus leads automatically to the exclusion of those South Africans who have historically been the most marginalised.

The history of South Africa until 1994 was characterised by the struggle between Afrikaans (formerly Dutch) and English-speaking white South Africans for control over cheap and exploitable black labour. Closely tied to this struggle were the efforts of both groups to establish the dominance of their languages across racial boundaries. All over the world, political and economic dominance

has always been accompanied by linguistic dominance. With political power firmly in the hands of Afrikaners, and economic power mainly in the hands of English-speaking whites, especially after 1948, a delicate truce was maintained for 50 years in the form of a bilingual policy, which meant that, unlike whites, black South Africans had to be proficient in two languages in addition to their mother tongues in order to gain access to the limited opportunities for advancement open to them. By contrast, white South Africans enjoyed the benefits of mother-tongue education and access to advancement opportunities through their mother tongues.

Since 1994, Afrikaans has yielded much ground to English as a language of public discourse, or lingua franca of the elite. This has enabled a small minority of black South Africans to advance. It has maintained the privileged position of white English speakers, and has had little impact on the favourable position of white Afrikaans speakers, most of whom are highly proficient in English. However, it has impacted negatively on the majority of Afrikaans speakers, who are black or "coloured", and has made no difference to the majority of black South Africans, who are as much excluded by English as by Afrikaans, and already face many other obstacles to advancement. African languages have made few inroads into high-status functions, and have even been marginalised further in many areas.

One of the most important contributions to the understanding of South African reality was the debate sparked by the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1960s and '70s about whether race or class offered the most suitable perspective from which to analyse the dynamics of injustice in our society. A consensus gradually emerged in which it was recognised that neither of the two offered a satisfactory explanation without taking cognisance of the other. The term *racial capitalism* came to serve as shorthand for this insight.

Activist intellectuals came to see that race had functioned throughout our history as a criterion for demarcating the interests of the capitalist class from the oppressed classes. White workers — mainly Afrikaners — were co-opted into the capitalist system by being granted certain privileges in the form of job reservation and, importantly, access to advancement opportunities, especially in the civil service, through their mother tongue, Afrikaans. Thus the Afrikaner electorate had a stake in maintaining and furthering the interests of the white, English-speaking capitalist class, and vice versa. At the same time, racist legislation and a vast apparatus of repression, negotiated between the state and the private sector, ensured that blacks remained economically dependent, a source of cheap and exploitable labour with which to enrich whites. Thus an unlikely alliance was forged between an Afrikaner nationalist politics of recognition and upliftment of "poor whites" on the one hand, and the interests of the white, English-speaking corporate sector on the other. This "accumulation strategy" is well described in Terreblanche's controversial book *300 Years of inequality in South Africa*.

This analysis has to be updated if it is to serve our understanding of the transition over the past ten years. The accumulation strategy of apartheid finally collapsed in 1994 under various local and international pressures of an economic and political nature. A severe shortage of labour and increasing political unrest and instability led to an economic crisis that rendered the racial criteria of privilege impossible to maintain, and required the accelerated establishment of a black middle class with a stake in the capitalist system. This proto-middle class was already available in the ranks of the ANC, which had, quite understandably, been led by an educated black elite since its inception — just as, earlier, Afrikaner nationalism drew its leadership from among a small number of Afrikaner notables.

Unlike the Afrikaner nationalist leaders, however, the leadership of the ANC were for the most part educated in schools and universities in South Africa or overseas where English was the language of instruction and "English civilisation" the focus of aspiration. They belonged to what African historians sometimes call the "missionary elite", those few Africans who were targeted for education and relative privilege by churches and other agents of British colonialism in a society dominated by white English speakers.

In the South African context, such leaders were the products of the struggle between Afrikaners and English speakers for dominance across racial boundaries. Blacks were treated as pawns in this struggle in a manner akin to the way Third World countries came to be used by the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Whereas the Nationalist government had, with limited success, sought allies among black traditional leaders and the rural population in the bantustans, the white liberal establishment had chosen to target the growing urban population and, more specifically, the small emerging middle class among them. The leadership of the ANC came from among the latter group.

This is not to blame or criticise the ANC. In any social movement, the leadership tends to be drawn from among the middle class, and the white liberal establishment in South Africa had a vested interest in reaching out to this class among black South Africans at the time that they did. Struggle leaders can hardly be blamed for making use of the opportunities this offered to them to acquire skills and resources that could benefit the movements they were establishing. The important thing is not to assign blame, but to understand the dynamics inherent in our history and our present situation. With such an understanding, decision-makers within the ANC government of today might avoid the pitfalls awaiting them as the new elite, as long as the political will to do so is present.

The post-1994 political economy has, to a significant extent, moved away from the racial demarcations of the past. The elite of our country has become increasingly multiracial as public institutions and the private sector have begun to be transformed in racial terms. However, we should not fool ourselves into believing that a capitalist economy in a country such as ours, and at the present juncture in our history, can be all-inclusive, i.e. that it can function without boundaries.

At present, our economy is simply not large enough to provide the same opportunities for everyone. Inequality will be with us for some time. Whether the capitalist economy will, in time, be replaced by a post-capitalist alternative of some kind, or whether it will grow at a sufficient pace to remain stable and absorb increasing numbers of the presently marginalised over the long term, is an important debate in itself. But whatever the case may be, it is of the utmost importance that we prevent the socio-economic cleavages in our society from becoming irreversibly attached to other boundary markers that might come to take the place occupied by race during the 20th century, thereby acquiring more permanence than might be necessary.

As I have pointed out, the danger is very real that language may come to fulfil this function. It is ideally suited for this purpose since, while it allows for increasing numbers of black South Africans to enter the ranks of the privileged — thereby bestowing a certain credibility on the system — it draws the line precisely where the neo-liberal market suggests it should be drawn. At present, about half of the population are excluded from meaningful, beneficial participation in the economy, and are still trapped in poverty. Similarly, about half of the population are not functionally proficient in English. Just as the vast majority of the poor in South Africa are black, the vast majority of non-English-proficient South Africans are also black. And they are mainly the rural dwellers and women who subsist on the margins of our

economy, the very same people who do not have realistic access to English as a language of empowerment.

Thus the boundaries of privilege have come to correspond quite starkly with linguistic boundaries. This state of affairs is masked by the dramatic and visible deracialisation of our society in the higher echelons, and the fact that many among the English-proficient elite have a language other than English as their mother tongue. (We have yet to learn to analyse our linguistic dynamics in terms of proficiency rather than home language, as is shown by the 2001 census, which enquired only after the "home language" of respondents, and not their proficiency, or lack of it, in other languages.) The danger, then, is that those who currently benefit from the system might come to form a new, quasi-ethnic (though multiracial) block, with a culture, networks and interests quite distinct from those of the majority. Functional proficiency in English, unattainable for the majority for the foreseeable future, may become a convenient means of drawing stark boundaries in order to protect the interests of this privileged block, in a manner uncannily similar to the way race functioned as such a boundary in the past.

In other words, the contingent, and non-blameworthy, historical fact that members of the emerging elite tend to be proficient in English, whereas the poor tend not to be, may inadvertently lead to a situation where English proficiency is no longer simply a concomitant of opportunity and privilege, but a condition for it. Our transition may come to be characterised by disillusioned future generations as a transition from racial to linguistic capitalism, transforming our society from a racist into a linguistic one.

I do not believe for one second that this kind of scenario is, at present, a deliberate goal of the ANC government. Despite any criticisms that might be levelled against them from whatever corner, the ANC government appears to be truly committed to creating "a better life for all". That this confidence is shared by most South Africans is evident from the ANC's resounding victory in the recent elections. We are at a juncture in our history where it is still possible, through strategic and visionary interventions by our leaders, to avert the kind of scenario that I am warning against. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the ANC government should take immediate and drastic steps to prevent proficiency in English from becoming further established as a marker of opportunity and privilege.

It should no longer be taken for granted that whoever wishes to improve their lot, and that of their communities, by becoming educated, entering the job market, and striving for leadership positions, should first acquire English. Creative language policies can turn proficiency in our indigenous languages — a skill already possessed in abundance by the millions of poor people in our country — into "cultural capital" with which to access opportunities for advancement. Equitable use of the official languages by government and public institutions like the public broadcaster, mother-tongue-based multilingual education from the primary to the tertiary level, making proficiency in languages other than English a condition for employment in the civil service, awarding state contracts and tax benefits to companies with multilingual policies, and valorising the indigenous languages by using them for high-status functions, such as addresses by our political leaders, would prevent the serious remaining inequalities in our society from becoming cast in stone along the lines of a linguistic barrier.

We cannot afford a new apartheid in South Africa. We dare not countenance a new "pass system", where English takes the place of the old "dompas". We have a responsibility — and a historic opportunity — as a society to show the world that a political

transition can result in real benefits to all concerned, regardless of the colour of their skin, or the habit of their tongue.

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