

LANGUAGE POLICY RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

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I want to make a few general points first about the language question, then deal with the National Language Project very briefly, and finally with the agenda for language policy research in South Africa. The original paper on which my presentation is based was prepared for a seminar at Yale University.

The first point is that the language question derives from, in the first place, the national question - the question of national unity - because of the function of language as a medium of communication and a transmitter of culture. It arises technically from the social question because of the function of language as an instrument of production. In other words from the unequal and discriminatory distribution of economic, political and cultural power.

I'd like to quote from Beer and Jacobs' book on language policy and national unity just to demonstrate this point more clearly. They say;

A number of questions arise concerning the translation of linguistic heterogeneity into a political issue addressed by public policy. First, how do language demands come to be posed in the first place? Is language policy a result of grass roots mobilisation, or a pre-emptive government policy designed to forestall or alter otherwise less palatable unrest? Second, what is the social and political context in which language becomes a salient political issue? If the crucial variable in this discussion were the extent of the linguistic cleavage alone, then one would expect intense language conflict in Papua New Guinea or within the Soviet Union and so forth.

The conclusion to this volume, argues that language difference alone do not necessarily lead to challenges to national unity. It is the trends of the perceived inequality of social status and unequal access to economic rewards or political power due to language use which is crucial for the politicisation of language use and its degeneration into conflict. Einar Hangan, the Norwegian social linguist makes the point very crudely and simply. He says, in the final analysis the language conflict in places like Belgium, Yugoslavia and so on boils down to the unequal distribution of jobs.

I think that particular perspective is becoming more and more understood in the liberation movement. But I think we must say very clearly right from the outset that actually this is a sorely neglected area of research and of policy in the liberation movement. Broadly speaking, in fact, we've adopted an extremely laissez faire attitude which has boiled down to entrenching a petty bourgeois practice in the question of language policy.

It goes to the point where reputable South African social scientists - I don't want to mention names here - oppose language planning on the grounds that you must

leave your languages alone. Don't touch them. If they're going to change, they'll change in some sort of magical organic way. I want to make the point very strongly that language planning is part and parcel, integrally, of social planning, and that the moment you are faced with a situation of social inequality where language is a marker of that inequality, as it is in South Africa, you have got to do something by means of intervention, which means that you have got to start planning the use, the status, the function of language.

It is only recently that major political organisations, particularly the ANC, have begun to look at the language question more seriously. The ANC, in fact, in the report of the Harare workshop, say that they have rejoined the debate because in the 1950s there was in fact a very dramatic debate inside the ANC which was very unfortunately phased out. Other political organisations haven't really come up with any specific language policy. In fact, I had the singular honour - although I'm not sure if it was an honour - the other day when somebody asked somebody in another organisation (not the ANC by the way), 'What is your language policy?' This person said, 'Ask Neville' even though I don't belong to this person's organisation.

The point I want to make then is that language policy and research in the recent history of this country arose out of struggle. We began language policy research in a serious scientific manner only round about 1983 as a result of our experience in organisations like SACHED, the Council Black Education and Research Trust, and I can go on naming a whole string of organisations, South African Council of Churches and so on, as a result of our experiences of the ravages of Bantu Education. That is why we started. In other words, out of the experience of mass struggle, we had to confront the language question.

You will find the details in the Yale paper of the background to the coming into being of the National Language Project which I submit has played a catalytic role in getting people sensitised to the political and economic importance of the language question. Most people haven't understood that. And we must be honest about it. People haven't understood how language reinforces class division, class distinction, class privilege. They might have understood it somehow in their heads but they have never understood it in practice. Otherwise they would never have perpetuated the practices inside the liberation movement which they did in the past.

I was originally going to go into some detail on the history of the National Language Project, but I think we haven't got the time, I just want to make the point that we have put forward very clear proposals about language policy towards the democratisation of South Africa, reinforcing obviously other social forces, other social movements, that are working towards the democratisation of this country.

Those proposals in a nutshell are firstly, that we accept that English in the very near future is going to be the lingua franca of this country; that we however ensure that all the people and not only the middle class as is now the case have proficiency in English. Otherwise, it once again becomes a divisive social marker which will simply shift the divisions from race to class.

Secondly, that the African languages, the indigenous languages, specifically be promoted, be given priority; that resources be put into the development of those

languages on a scale that this country has never seen before; that they be encouraged, people be taught, be given incentives to learn the African languages because these are the languages that in the future will determine what happens in this country. As the relations of power shift in favour of the oppressed and exploited people, there is no doubt that the indigenous languages are going to become languages of employment, languages of higher education, and so on and so forth. We've got to do something about that now. We have many detailed proposals in regard to this, which we've worked out at workshops and so on, and which if there is time in the discussion we could look at.

Thirdly, the whole question of standard languages must be looked at from a class point of view. Standard languages are a class instrument of oppression and exploitation. The kinds of languages which are accepted for purposes of social interaction generally are not necessarily and should not be the so-called standard languages. That is a very big question and discussion, and I'm not able here to go into it.

In September last year the NLP called an international conference, with very strong African participation incidentally because we thought we could learn a lot, which we in fact did from some of the experiences of those countries. Participation included government agencies, semi-government agencies like the HSRC, across the spectrum of language-related projects and institutions in this country. That conference, looked particularly at democratisation; what we call language planning from below, on the one hand and standardisation on the other hand.

This led to a very important unanimous conference decision being taken to explore the possibility of what they called a democratic language board or a national language academy. To do away with the formal existence of the English Academy, the Afrikaans Akademie, the so-called Language Boards for the different African languages, and to subsume those functions under a national language academy or a democratic language board, with a view to conceptualising language policy research in the context of a nation-building project.

Again, although I cannot develop it, I just want to say that at present the steering committee that was elected by the conference is consulting with organisations - political, labour, community, and of course language organisations, educational organisations and so on - with a view to bringing about the most representative possible conference on this issue so that such a body can take over the whole question of co-ordinating language policy research in this country.

To move, lastly, to an agenda, what I say is *the* agenda - this is my personal view of course - for language policy research. There is a very important chapter by Gerhard Schuring of the HSRC in the report of the Languages in Conflict and Contact in Africa organisation, at the conference which they had in April last year. It's called 'Language Planning for a New South Africa.' He puts forward what I call a conservative liberal agenda for language policy research in this country. It is an important one because it touches on all the fundamental questions.

There are, however, some questions which are not raised there, which I believe from a radical point of view, should be asked. Firstly, the most important is quantitative research on the question of existing language policy impacting on the

political economy of the country. For example, how does the rate of illiteracy among rural workers affect productivity in agriculture?

Secondly, how does lack of proficiency in the standard varieties of the so-called official languages tend to reinforce the racial classification of the labour force? A basic question once again. It's not asked. How does lack of proficiency in English or Afrikaans affect industrial safety? And so on. You can simply spell them out; they virtually come by themselves once you adopt the correct stance to these things.

There's a host of related questions that ought to be investigated. The effect of such research would be to enhance the understanding of the entire population, specifically of the workers, of the reality and the crucial importance of language policy. People take language for granted. Unless you both problematise it and demonstrate to them the economic effect of language policy, they don't take it seriously.

Secondly, updated large-scale language-attitude surveys which would serve as a sound base from which to project language policy into the future. This is especially important in the educational sphere, needless to say. These points on the agenda should however not be mistaken for a commitment to a mechanically implied empiricist methodology. I'm not suggesting at all that until we have these figures we can't do anything. Not at all. But I do want to stress that if we do adopt an empiricist methodology we are simply going to entrench the status quo. After all, we all know that statistical surveys and opinion polls tend simply to mirror the dominant ideology, and therefore we have to be extremely sensitive in our interpretation of the findings of such surveys.

People, for example say that all the black workers want English. English is the preferred language. That is true, because English is the key to economic advancement. It is also the key to social status. That is why they want it. That will change when the power relations change.

Then, on my second last point, how can the urban and the rural poor be drawn into the determination of language policy? The National Language Project's demands for language planning for below, we continue to believe is completely feasible. That is why this idea of a national language academy is such an important idea. It has come from our own experience, from the experience of the people in struggle, particularly during the '80s. The Conference of the NLP was an attempt to address this question, and to show that in fact we must go ahead along those lines, involving ordinary people, people who are involved in literacy work, people who are involved in second language English, or conversational Xhosa or Zulu or whatever projects, in the determination of language policy. The fundamental democratic principle is that those who have to execute the policy have to have a vital say in the making of the policy. That is a fundamental principle. You can't get away from that.

Finally, there is an urgent need to go back to first principles, to clarify what we call the nation-building project of the national liberation movement, as well as our understanding of the relationship between language and culture. I have a lot to say on this but I haven't got the time to do that now. However, I believe, as we said earlier, that unless you ask these prior questions you are simply being reactive. You cannot be proactive. You cannot in fact generate policy options that are both feasible

in that transformatory sense of the chameleon moving very, very slowly on the one hand, but preparing to change colour, preparing for a revolutionary rupture. You can only do that if you have a proactive vision towards which you are actually working, and, of course, the flexibility to adapt to the realities as they manifest themselves.

DISCUSSION

FRANCIE LUND: We cannot formulate reasonable policies for the future until we've got uniform budgeting procedures, until we've got the most basic information system. And we have not got the most basic information system on which to plan social policy. This means we have to start addressing what we're going to do with the present civil service which is administering the policies which we're about to move to. If we want a chance of a better policy in the future, we have to make those bureaucracies more uniform now and start building up an information system now at a national level.

MIKE MULLER: The fact is that if we go to communities and ask them what their priorities are, they will say some form of health care provision is very important. If that is so, we have to start our policy formulation from the mass base that everyone is talking about, with what the masses are demanding. Let's start to transform that into a useful product. Part of that is indeed to use precisely all the service research foci of essential national health research, so that you take the resources that people want to see, the clinic that they want to see rather than some abstruse campaign. You take those resources and you start trying to deliver something that is useful. You really don't want to divorce this debate about research and health from the very large expectations and misunderstandings that sit out there in the community.

JERRY COOVADIA: I think that what South African society does is creates a milieu. It creates a milieu where individuals react in certain predictable ways. So that if you look at agricultural research, if you look at medical research, if you look at technological research, it's not just the state which says that you must do work in that. It leaves it to the individuals, but because it suits my career to do esoteric research I do that, and in fact that's where the majority of universities have done their research. It's not simply state control. It is often the individual, the institutions and the group which determine the priorities in which the money is spent. There's a suggestion that the state at the moment is decentralising and that it's paid particular attention to individual excellence and that it's drawing in a lot of private funding for research. I would say that many of those things are laudable and probably worth aiming for. Was it your intention to suggest that those things are all bad?

ANIA GROBICKI: Previously there was a really coherent project. There was an immense amount of defence funding and so on, for national areas. What's been happening more recently is there's been a shift to try and fragment these institutions and the system as much as possible. Where individual excellence fits into this is that there's been a buying out of scientists and people with technical backgrounds, high

skills, technical training, to defend their individual interests. That is why the emphasis on individual excellence as a sole criterion for allocating research funding now is dangerous. Because it's then difficult to create any sort of process, or research foresight, of drawing those individuals out into the community, back into the process of looking at what are national sector economic priorities and what research should actually be funded to focus on those priorities.

ABDOULE BATHILY: I would like to just draw your attention to the importance of language policy. Because wherever you go to the other parts of Africa, you will find that there is a crisis of the education system. One of the sources of this crisis, is linked to the problem of language. What kind of language should be used, not only for cultural activities but also for the school system? But we must not forget that the educational language is the best channel for country-wide expression for a people or for a nation. Beyond that, a number of studies have been made in our part of Africa to prove that school performance - not only at primary school and secondary school, but also at university level - is very much linked to the use of the national language or the lack of it. I think we have to start to respect our own languages. These languages have the same capacity as the English or the Turkish language. The experience is that French and English cannot be the national languages now. The African people are not Francophone; they are not Anglophone.

PAULUS ZULU: If we are going to spend some time and resources and energy in the development of English as the lingua franca in the near future, and then at the same time spend as much on resources to develop local languages or vernaculars as I put it to become the languages of employment, I find that a bit difficult in terms of expending resources. I am also concerned with the capacity of the local languages to actually sustain a technology.

The second aspect lies with the position of international communications. I am finding it here both necessary and expedient to stress that when a language has already been developed and is familiar to a very large sector of the population it can be used to address other people internationally. You then tamper with that process at the expense of, one, international communications and, two, production at a local and international level.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER: I just want to make the fundamental point that any language is capable of development to the highest possible degree. There is nothing to prevent any language from going to the highest possible degree. It's a matter of resources; it's a matter of policy priorities; and so on.

MOSES NGOASHENG: In relation to the national technology system; is it changing? Is it changing from being a military, big projects, culture into something else? Is the national technology system focused enough or directed enough so that it will be able to produce the kind of technology that is appropriate to meeting the basic needs of our people?

ANIA GROBICKI: There has been a major shift from research and technical support for the defence sector to actually pulling the money out of science and technology research - for instance ARMSCOR is being run down - and a lot of these places are really suffering under a shortage of research funding. I feel that it's very important

that we maintain the technological capability for the future of this country.

The answer to the second part of your question is that of course it can. But the ship has to be turned around. People's training and their attitudes have to change so that they're prepared to research those kinds of problems rather than to focus on the high technology areas that have been popular up till now. I think those are the sorts of debates which really have to come out in public. The fact that the nuclear accelerator is still running at an annual operating cost of R43,000,000, which is say half of the budget of the HSRC: do you want that nuclear accelerator or not? Who decides whether it's closed down? In a lot of these areas the decisions have already been made, generally by individuals. The processes are absolutely not open. That's why we're trying to open up those processes for public scrutiny.