



**HAL**  
open science

# Multilingual Voices Lost in Monolingual Texts and Messages

Kathleen Heugh

► **To cite this version:**

Kathleen Heugh. Multilingual Voices Lost in Monolingual Texts and Messages. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2001, *Writing in South Africa after the end of Apartheid - G.R.A.S. 4e colloque international Saint-Denis de La Réunion* (7-9 décembre 2000), 21, pp.99-122. hal-02344220

**HAL Id: hal-02344220**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344220v1>**

Submitted on 4 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Multilingual Voices Lost in Monolingual Texts and Messages<sup>1</sup>

---

South Africa of the new millennium should be a site of the flowering of new literary voices. The negotiated political changes of the 1990s and the dramatic changes facilitated by one of the most progressive constitutions in the world would lead one to expect that now more than ever before, voices previously unheard would pierce the silence. The situation, however, is far from this. The reality is that literary voices emerging from the majority of the population are unlikely to materialise for many years to come. African voices which are able to edge aside a space remain a part of a very small middle class who are well equipped to write in English. The art of writing in African languages is the terrain of a very small group of well-educated and erudite people who write for a largely adult audience. Writing for young children in African languages is a sorely neglected area, the consequence of which is that there is no tradition in South Africa to encourage children themselves to write in the languages they know best. By way of contrast, we have for centuries enjoyed a rich oral literary tradition crafted by mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers in every home. The validation of the written word, and particularly the written word in English has had the inverse effect on the oral tradition. It has lost status and thus its practitioners are losing touch with their art. Whilst the written text becomes the terrain of an elite few, the oral tradition of the majority is under threat or already almost lost.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of an earlier article, *Multilingual voices – monolingual texts and messages: isolation and the crumbling of bridges* published in *Agenda* 46 (Heugh 2000a).

Throughout history there has been a pattern of linguistic behaviour in which multilingual communities co-exist with political hierarchies that select certain languages for high status functions. The pattern has been one where a dominant political order, accompanied by one or two languages of high status, eventually gives way to another political order, accompanied often by another language. The pattern diverges somewhat in regard to the relationship between the political hierarchy and the communities with which it coexists. A separatist position may be adopted, where the language of high status is used as a gatekeeper to power and as a way of supporting segregation. Alternatively, an approach is taken to bring together different groups, include differences of culture and encourage bilingualism and multilingualism.

What has happened in Southern Africa is that after centuries of migratory patterns, uneasy coexistence and struggles for power, we find communities of people speaking a range of languages, some of which are related and others that are not. On account of the vicissitudes of history, the linguistic communities that communicate primarily through the spoken word have found themselves under the political domination of those who use both written and spoken forms of communication. Increasingly, over the last decade, the middle class political and economic élite has been emerging as a group who function through English, and those who do not are left on the fringe. A closer examination of the middle class will show that its membership has been expanding, predominantly with the inclusion of black men, and to a much lesser extent, black women, who have a proficiency in English. This is despite a change of government and a democratic constitution that supports multilingualism, gives official status to eleven languages and supports gender equality.

A bilingual approach to education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which demonstrated successful academic, social and linguistic results by the late 1930s, was demolished under the National Party rule after 1948<sup>2</sup>. National Party rule, based on the principle of

---

<sup>2</sup> Afrikaans-English dual medium education was commonplace for *white* and *coloured* pupils in many parts of South Africa during this period. A major study conducted under the auspices of the National Bureau of Educational and

segregation, extended this principle to linguistic segregation, which it effected in the education system. One of the intentions had been to provide the protected and nurturing conditions for the development of Afrikaans as a language which could operate at the highest levels of economic, educational and political activity in the country. It was believed that this would happen if white Afrikaans-speaking learners could be separated from their English-speaking peers, in educational institutions which would receive particularly favourable resources in terms of the size of government subsidies and grants. The effect of a segregationist approach to education and languages in education was to provide a period of protection and advantage for both Afrikaans- and English-speakers during the half-century of National Party rule. However, the advantages accorded Afrikaans have not been sustainable in the long-term. The enormous resistance to the use of Afrikaans as the language of vertical control in the country, especially in the armed forces and police services during the latter years of apartheid was never applied to English. The political resistance to Afrikaans, which accumulated between 1948 and 1990, has significantly contributed to its loss of functional status over the last ten years. The segregationist approach to language has not, therefore, been to the long-term advantage of Afrikaans-speaking people. More significantly, it has contributed to a long-term impoverishment of most South Africans, socially, politically, educationally and economically. Segregation in South Africa was designed to confine African people to rural areas whilst relying on migrant male labour to support the mining and other industries. Women and children were thus left in the rural areas where access to educational resources has been most limited. A cycle of massive under-education was established in rural areas so that sustained

---

Social Research (1936-8) and analysed by E.G. Malherbe in *The Bilingual School* (1943) demonstrated that pupils from these schools were more socially tolerant of social, cultural and linguistic difference than pupils from monolingual schools. Furthermore, pupils in the dual medium schools outperformed their peers in monolingual schools in relation to their overall academic achievement as well as the level of linguistic proficiency in both the first and second languages.



literacy and proficiency in English became almost impossible. The success of the education policy under apartheid is that its intended consequences have continued beyond the lifespan of its official practice. Despite the new government, constitution and policies, the consequences of apartheid education show no signs of reversal even at the turn of the millennium. An unintended consequence of the policy has, however, ensured that those who have access to the written word in English, rather than Afrikaans, have access to the "fruits" of the contemporary order.

Two and a half millenia ago, when the Greek Empire was at its height, Greek was the language of governance, the philosophers and the education of the élite. As the Romans gained ascendancy they combined what they learnt from Greece with their own thought. The use of both Latin and Greek, alongside one another, became commonplace. One of South Africa's greatest scholars of classical history, T.J. Haarhoff, drew attention to the remarkable benefits of the coming together of different cultures in the Roman Empire in contrast with the suicidal character of Ancient Greece, suspicious of outsiders and purist of nature.

It is difficult for those who have grown up in a uni-lingual society, with a single cultural tradition, to appreciate fully the significance of the double cultural inheritance of Rome... It is not generally realised that when Hellenic "humanism" came to mould native Roman "gravitas," there resulted not an addition of parts, but *a new creation* (Haarhoff 1938: vii).

It is important to remark that Haarhoff's intention in comparing the Greek and Roman Empires was to warn the political leadership in South Africa of the perils of following the racist fascism of Germany in the 1930s.

At a time when "racial" selfishness is elevated to a virtue, it is well to remember that Rome created a unity of many races that played an individual part in a greater whole, without being reduced to a rigid uniformity. The essence of the Roman culture was its double nature; and when Greek died out, Roman civilisation perished. (Haarhoff 1938: vii)

The Roman élite sent their children to university in Athens to study Greek and access the art of Greek rhetoric and the ideas of Greek philosophers through Greek. Eventually, when the Roman élite had learnt and absorbed so much of Greek culture, language and knowledge that "... the Roman youth no longer went to Athens for their university training it was because Athens—the Athens of the past—had come to Rome" (Haarhoff 1938: 318). Ever since the rise of the Roman Empire, the ability to communicate in at least two, preferably more languages has been highly valued. Bilingual education has been the norm for the children of the élite. Latin, in particular, and Greek continued to be the languages of prestigious education across Europe long after the demise of the Roman Empire, alongside other languages. The Normans took French to the English court after the Invasion of England in 1066. The sea-faring nations of Europe despatched their explorers around the world as highly educated multilingual emissaries. The Dutch East India Company representatives at the Cape in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century had spent years in the East and were proficient not only in Dutch, but Latin, Greek and Chinese.

What Haarhoff was concerned about in the 1930s was the social and intellectual sterility of pursuing the purist, monocultural and obviously monolingual consequences of a philosophy built on an ill-conceived notion of racial purity.

... (R)acial feeling is based on what people believe about themselves, not necessarily on what is true. "The Greeks of history," says H. A. L. Fisher, "believed themselves to be one in race, language and institutions, and in all these respects were misled . . . like all great peoples of the world, the Greeks drew their wealth from many quarters." (Haarhoff: viii)

The development of Afrikaner nationalism, precipitated in part by the insistent use of English as the hegemonic language under British rule, included the pursuit of Afrikaans at all costs. Had the warnings of Haarhoff been heeded, and another route chosen—one that was based on inclusivity rather than segregation—things may have turned out differently. Had the country's political leadership

followed the Roman example, and extended the successful application of bilingual education across all communities, we may, today, have seen a socially tolerant and functional multilingual society. Instead, the Hellenic approach in combination with the fascism of the 1930s held sway. This, in turn had several results, which from the perspective of language, include: a loss of status of African languages; a growing resentment toward Afrikaans as a language of vertical control; and a growing misconception that English would facilitate the passage to nirvana beyond apartheid.

The effect on the under and working class speakers of African languages has been devastating. The political, educational and economic impact on the status of these languages has led to literary stagnation and their functional demise. Terminology development in these languages has not kept abreast of the technological and scientific developments of the contemporary world over the last half-century. Out-dated, prescriptive language boards, compatible with segregationist thinking, and which insisted upon linguistic archaisms and "purity," have strangled writers. Young children have too early been expected to attempt the impossible—to switch from learning through a familiar language to one which they either do not sufficiently know, or do not know at all. Those fortunate few, who have managed to remain within an alienating school system and reach high school, find that when they attempt to study their own language as a subject, it is a rarefied, antiquated variety which often bears little resemblance to the language they hear in their homes or immediate environment. The cumulative effect is one of low levels of academic achievement in combination with poor linguistic development in both the first and second language.

Another dimension to the linguistic ramifications of social and political inequity is that since little value has been accorded African languages beyond school, many education officials, teachers, parents and pupils appear to have lost sight of the crucial role of the home language in the establishment of literacy. In so doing, sight has been lost of the dependence of the entire curriculum and academic success upon the initial and sustained development of

literacy. The switch too early from mother tongue to English, has been taking place in South Africa since the SOWETO uprising of 1976. The switch has taken place before mother tongue literacy is firmly established and before sufficient oral knowledge of English vocabulary and sentence structure would have made this possible for most learners (see Macdonald 1990; Macdonald & Burrows 1991; Strauss 1999). Learners whose home languages are English or Afrikaans, on the other hand, have had mother tongue literacy and education throughout, plus the addition of at least one other language as a subject and taught by teachers who have a specialisation in teaching this language. It is not surprising therefore that the literacy levels and general educational levels for speakers of English and Afrikaans far exceed those who speak African languages. To compound matters, the degree to which women speakers of African languages are being left behind linguistically and educationally far exceeds that of men.

Statistical Source	Overall level of illiteracy in SA	Female illiteracy	Male illiteracy
MarkData & PANSALB 2000a (Table 16) <sup>3</sup>	43% over the age of 16 cannot read	46%	38%
SA Census 1996 (SAIRR 2000:112)	36% over the age of 20 are illiterate	55,48% of those who are illiterate are women	44,5% of those who are illiterate are men

<sup>3</sup> MarkData was commissioned by PANSALB to carry out a nation-wide survey: *A Sociolinguistic survey on: Language use and Language Interaction in South Africa*, between November 1999 and March 2000.

*Provinces with largest differences between literacy levels of women and men in terms of statistics from the 1996 census*

Province	% of those who are illiterate and who are women	% of those who are illiterate and who are men	% of illiteracy in the province
Eastern Cape	58	42	42
KwaZulu-Natal	60	40	41
Northern Province	64	36	49

(Percentages of illiteracy of women and men extrapolated from SAIRR 2000: 112)

With the exception of the Western Cape, there is a higher proportion of men who are literate than women throughout the country. The benchmark criteria used in the 1996 census was based on a correlation between illiteracy and fewer than 7 years of schooling. What the table above demonstrates is that in the most densely populated rural areas of the country, the degree of marginalisation of women considerably outweighs that of men.

When one couples the degree of illiteracy with the extent to which people understand messages from government, the issue of marginalisation becomes even more disturbing. Only 49% of the population understand speeches or statements made by government officials or prominent leaders (MarkData & PANSALB 2000a:8). If you are a woman in South Africa, there is a more than 50% chance that you are both illiterate and unable to understand information which is disseminated by government. This incidence of marginalisation increases significantly if you live in the rural areas or some distance from the metropolitan centres.

In terms of the Constitution (1996), on the other hand, official status has been accorded to eleven languages and government is impelled to ensure that the status of languages other than English and Afrikaans is effectively advanced. The multi-lingual reality of South Africa is, in essence, enshrined by the Constitution. The Bill of Rights within the Constitution, in addition,



builds in protection clauses which guarantee South Africans the right to use their languages and prevents, in theory, discrimination based on language use/preference. The clauses which relate to language and language use are further strengthened, in theory, by the establishment of the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) which, in terms of its own legislation (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology 1995 & 1999), is to monitor government steps towards developing and advancing the practical status all official languages. It is also to promote the use of other languages in the country and take action where the rights of South Africans are compromised by virtue of their language/s. Given that so many South Africans are literally and figuratively so far from the centre and without the necessary linguistic expertise to access information, it is not surprising that by far the majority of complaints to PANSALB about alleged violation of language rights come from Afrikaans-speaking people (90% of the complaints to date). Those who are effectively marginalised by virtue of their language do not know that they have the right to object, and even if they did know, without the necessary requirement of literacy, it would be almost impossible for them to act upon this right. The same would apply, for the most part, to human rights and gender related violations.

If we reflect upon the words of Haarhoff, six decades later, and we take stock of the effects of the South African version of segregation and its impact upon matters connected to language and communication in the country, we must consider whether or not we can extricate ourselves from a national political, educational and economic suicide. Is it already too late to reverse the widening cleavage between those who have access to English and those who do not? Can we at this point truly validate and use effectively our multilingual resources when these have been seriously neglected and the bridges between them are in disrepair?

We are, at the turn of this century, in a country where 91% of people use with familiarity languages other than English in their ordinary everyday activities. The languages of our thoughts and dreams are languages other than English, for the most part. Yet, if



we wish to have our thoughts heard and noticed, inevitably we have to convert them into English—if we can. The PANSALB survey suggests that about 36% of people can understand English; 30% understand *isiZulu*; 29% understand Afrikaans and 21% understand *isiXhosa* (MarkData & PANSALB 2000b: Table 34). Other languages are less widely understood. This means that there are four lingua francas that are emerging, and many sociolinguists believe that there is considerable overlap of communication between *isiZulu* and *isiXhosa*. In other words 50% of South Africans understand *isiZulu* – *isiXhosa*. That government officials are not making use of this phenomenon is extraordinary in a country, which espouses democracy. *Ilanga*, the only newspaper which is published regularly in an African language, *isiZulu*, is the second most widely read newspaper in the country, after the *Sowetan* (MarkData & PANSALB 2000b: Table 16). *Ilanga* is circulated mainly in KwaZulu-Natal, whereas the *Sowetan* is circulated nationally, and this contributes to the size of its readership. That newspaper owners and advertisers have not appeared to appreciate the potential economic viability of publishing in other African languages is also extraordinary.

Despite the Constitution and the establishment of PANSALB, access to power, meaningful education and most state provided services continues to be much easier for those who are proficient in English and to a lesser extent, Afrikaans. The recent survey commissioned by PANSALB has revealed further alarming data of the degree to which speakers of some languages feel estranged from the mainstream. Apart from the 51% who do not understand speeches and information disseminated in English, 47% of people feel that they cannot access public services in their own languages, and this percentage fluctuates considerably according to the home language of speakers. The following table shows the extent to which some linguistic communities find themselves unable to access services in their own language:

All South Africans	47%
<i>IsiNdebele</i>	75%
<i>Xitsonga</i>	71%
<i>Setswana</i>	68%
<i>SeSotho</i>	63%
<i>IsiZulu</i>	57%
<i>SiSwati</i>	53%
<i>Tshivenda</i>	51%
<i>Sepedi</i>	43%
Afrikaans	41%
<i>IsiXhosa</i>	37%
English	15%

*South Africans unable to access services in their own languages*  
(MarkData - PANSALB: 2000a: 4)

If between 50 and 75% of the speakers of the nine official African languages cannot access services in these languages, then clearly their official status has very little meaning.

Quite obviously, South Africa is in the throes of upheaval and attempts toward transformation. Thus we would expect to find contrary impulses, which pull us both toward and away from the structural inequities of the past. It was never going to be possible to cast off the mantles of segregationist power given the degree to which they had become embodied in every fibre of the socio-economic-political order. An unravelling of the effect of segregation on languages in education demonstrates just how far we still have to go if we are serious about building a country, which listens with comprehension and is accommodating of many voices.

Immediately after the elections of 1994, the Department of Education at national level set about initiating major changes to the education system with the intention of bringing about transformation and removing the inequities of the past. One of the changes brought about, on paper, is the little known language in education policy, which follows closely the Constitutional language principles. The minister announced the new policy in July of 1997 (Department of Education 1997b). Its announcement, however, was not given the fanfare treatment that had accompanied the announcement a few

months earlier of the new curriculum, Curriculum 2005 (Department of Education 1997a). The language policy is intended to foreground the mother tongue/ primary language of pupils in school whilst making adequate provision for the effective learning of at least one other language. It is based on the reality that every South African needs bilingual proficiency as a minimum requirement to function and communicate with people in a multilingual society. What this means in practice is that, in the first instance, appropriate reading materials and text-book materials should be available in all eleven languages, for the duration of the primary school (foundation and intermediate phases) at the very least.

Carole Bloch points out that there is no South African tradition of writing stories for children in African languages thus the early exposure of children to the printed words closest to their own home language is limited at best or non-existent at worst.

There can be no doubt that "literate" nations produce, promote and use constantly vast quantities of mother tongue literature for young children. There are no magic formulae—children learn to read by reading, and most successful readers read voraciously, and are exposed to many books. (Bloch 1999:118)

In the second instance, it means that since about 93% of the school-going population speak languages other than English, for obvious reasons, the additional language is inevitably going to be English.<sup>4</sup> This, in turn, implies that we need to have a large number of teachers who are sufficiently proficient themselves in English, to teach this language adequately. At present, only between 7 and 10% of teachers have the necessary English language proficiency to make this a realisable objective. Whereas the new curriculum was accompanied by a time frame for implementation, the national Department has been silent with regard to the implementation of the language policy. Current classroom practice and inadequate resources in at least 85% of schools make it possible to facilitate neither effective literacy in the mother tongue/home language/s nor the successful

---

<sup>4</sup> The data here and that which follows can be traced in SAIRR 2000: 127 ff; and Heugh 2000.

learning of English for the majority at the moment. Unless pupils are competent users of the language of instruction and the textbook, they will not be able to negotiate the curriculum as a whole. Kurt Komarek reminded delegates at the UNESCO Conference on Education for All in Dakar in April 2000, of the UNESCO definition of education:

“The term education means organised and sustained communication in order to trigger the learning process.”

According to this definition education is synonymous with communication. Consequently Education for All must be synonymous with education in languages familiar to children. (Komarek 2000)

Komarek proceeded to refer to education for all as “communication/education,” and questioned the extent of communication/education in sub-Saharan Africa. He reminded educators on this continent of an OAU document drawn up at a conference of African ministers of education in 1986, namely the *Language Plan of Action for Africa* in which the position of these ministers towards mother tongue literacy was presented as follows:

Supporting language for literacy purposes is a means for enabling primary school children to benefit from the wider school curriculum and as a key step towards empowering them to participate more fully in the economic, social and political life of their community. (OAU 1986)

In a related discussion, Catherine Snow at a seminar at the University of the Western Cape (2000) referred to a major study on *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998) in which the definition of reading emphasises “meaning, as well as knowledge of the orthographic system.” In other words, there is no real education if learners derive no meaning from the texts they are expected to read. Snow, during the same discussion, argued that reading texts in any language is difficult if more than 1% of the words are unfamiliar to the reader. “If 2% or more words are unknown, then comprehension breaks down” (Snow 2000).

The recent results of the 1999 international Department of Education (DOE)- UNESCO-UNICEF study of levels of literacy and numeracy of Grade 4 pupils demonstrates the alarming if not catastrophic state of our education system (Strauss 1999). The shockingly low levels of literacy and numeracy in South Africa when compared with other countries came as a surprise to many. The tests when conducted in South Africa, under the auspices of the DOE, were conducted in English only, even though this is in contravention of the department's own language in education policy, and even though this effectively defies the non-discrimination clauses of the constitution. That the tests were conducted in English is an overt testimony to the extension of the second phase of Bantu Education in our schools.<sup>5</sup> The tests were administered in August of 1999, at a point where most Grade 4 children who speak languages other than English had for the most part had so little exposure to English that the very task of reading text in English is absurd. That numeracy skills were tested through English is even more absurd. The decontextualised discourse of mathematics and specificity of mathematical vocabulary is such that those who are at the early stages of learning a second language should never be expected to work through their second language in this domain. It would be inconceivable in Japan, Germany, France, Scandinavia or China to

---

<sup>5</sup> Phase 1 of Bantu Education was from the date of the Bantu Education Act in 1953 to 1976—the date of the student uprising in SOWETO. This uprising was ignited by the insistence of a new West Rand Bantu Affairs commissioner who insisted that, after mother-tongue medium of instruction ended in the last year of primary school, the 50-50 Afrikaans-English medium policy in high schools had to be enforced. The uprising was followed by legislative amendment to education for black students in 1979. The period of mother-tongue instruction was reduced to 4 years after which a rapid switch of medium to either Afrikaans or English would take place. Most parents chose English as the target language after Grade 4. Substantial studies coordinated by Carol Macdonald and published in 1990 showed that the effect of the rapid switch in the 5<sup>th</sup> year was too soon for most African language speaking pupils. By the end of Grade 4, if they were lucky they would have been exposed to 700 words in English, yet the curriculum for Grade 5 demanded that they know 5000 words in English.



expect school pupils<sup>6</sup> with three and a half years of learning English to be tested on their literacy and /or numeracy development in English or any other than their home language.

The following are some of the results of the DOE-UNESCO-UNICEF study on Grade 4 pupils in South Africa:

Teacher Characteristics:

- 84% of Grade 4 teachers are women.
- 40% of teachers only have primary education as their highest qualification.
- 43% of teachers have 3 or more years post secondary education.

(from Strauss 1999: Tables B25 & B27).

*National and Provincial Grade 4 Literacy Scores*

	Word recognition %	Detail Content %	Writing Skills %	Overall % literacy score
National	68	43	24	48
E Cape	68	45	19	48
Free State	60	31	19	40
Gauteng	82	53	46	61
KZN	70	49	28	51
Mpumalanga	53	28	8	33
N Cape	77	44	35	53
N Province	63	38	14	43
N West	62	37	22	45
W Cape	83	52	44	61

(from Strauss 1999: Table C1)

On average our pupils recognise only 68% of the vocabulary they were expected to read. Snow's observation, referred to earlier, is that when more than 2% of words are unfamiliar, comprehension breaks down, indicates the seriousness of the situation here. On average, our pupils do not recognise 32% of the vocabulary. The level of comprehension is going to be seriously limited, since our

<sup>6</sup> Other than children of migrant or refugee communities resident in these countries.



pupils do not come close to recognising 98% of the words in the texts they are expected to read, in English at Grade 4 level. The drop between the incidence of word recognition and understanding the content, from 68% to 43% (above), is therefore explicable. The scores for writing are terrifying in their implications.

That it was considered acceptable by the DOE in 1999 for our pupils to be assessed through English demonstrates that there is a two-pronged assumption, that there is unlikely to be any further emphasis on mother tongue/first language literacy development for Grade 4 pupils and beyond, and education in and beyond the fourth grade will be mediated through English. If pupils at Grade 4 level demonstrate the level of literacy in English at this stage as reflected above, and there is no serious attention to ground literacy in the first language, then the prognosis for their academic success is dismal. Proficiency in English will never be achieved through this route (see also Alexander 2000).

Given that there are other attempts to reduce, if not remove, inherited structural inequities, the apparent impotence of the Department in seizing the opportunity to focus on the matter of literacy and the appropriate languages of learning, is perplexing. Whilst it prevaricates, the educational inequalities between speakers of English and languages other than English will increase and the impact on development and the economy further down the line is going to be little different from where the previous government was heading (see Heugh 1995 page 339-342 where a discussion of the outcome of a passive approach to language rights and language planning predicted that this would be the case). Close observation of classroom practice shows that the new language policy is not being implemented, and there is no evidence of the departments planning for implementation or the adequate provisioning thereof. What I see in township classrooms of the Western Cape, are resources that are so inadequate that neither objective of the language in education policy can be achieved. There are very few reading materials at the Foundation Phase in Xhosa, and most numeracy materials are in English from Grade 1 onwards. Neither the development of the pupil's primary language/mother tongue nor the successful learning

of English can occur. Meaningful access to the curriculum is thoroughly compromised in the process. (See also Plüddemann, Mati & Mahlalela-Thusi 1999, and Vesely 2000)

Colleagues and I work with teachers in an in-service teacher education programme, a Further Diploma in Education (Multilingual Education), at the University of Cape Town.<sup>7</sup> 90% of the teachers on our programme are women who teach in primary schools and who already have a three-year diploma in education. When asked to undertake written tasks the teachers exhibit enormous resistance and fear. During the first two years of the programme we expected teachers to write their assignments in English, since this is the dominant language of higher education, the language of most academic texts etc. We discovered that most teachers found this deeply stressful, even when assignments were broken down into small units. We have for the last two years experimented by offering students the opportunity to write in the language of their choice and we have found that many opt for writing in Xhosa. The content of what they offer in Xhosa has been significantly more substantial than that which we received from the same teachers in English.

Foundation Phase teachers generally teach in the mother tongue, but teachers from Grade 4 onwards tell us that they are expected to teach through English, exactly as they had done during the last years of National Party rule. The teachers will admit, however, that they use both English and Xhosa in almost equal proportions. When we visit the classrooms, we do not hear equal proportions of English and Xhosa. We find that Intermediate and Senior Phase teachers in Western Cape townships conduct most of their lessons through the medium of Xhosa, with some code-mixing (using a few English terms within a predominantly Xhosa discourse), yet they expect their pupils *to write* in English in their work-books. The pupils, however, cannot write in English, independently. They copy sentences written on the board by the

---

<sup>7</sup> PRAESA (The Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) and the Department of Education, University of Cape Town, have since 1997 offered a Further Diploma in Education (Multilingual Education).

teacher, in English. When I have asked the pupils to tell me what they understand of these sentences, they cannot. They cannot, with accuracy, relate the English sentences to the content of the lesson in which they have just participated through Xhosa. Often the teachers' sentences in English contain both spelling and syntactical errors. The pupils do not know this, they do not understand the sentences anyway and they are obliged to use rote learning, without meaning, for assessment purposes. Their parents, the school principals and visiting officials from the provincial department of education, however, see (broken) English sentences in the workbooks, and English textbooks, and assume that the medium of teaching is English.

Observations of Foundation Phase classrooms, where the new tricks of outcomes-based-education have been interpreted as providing endless worksheets with a few missing words to be filled in by pupils, reveal that pupils learn how to guess, not to read or to write. Grade 3s are seldom expected to produce more than the occasional three-word sentence. There is no writing of stories or letters, let alone a paragraph, in other words there is virtually no attempt to encourage experimentation with, or development of writing. How can there be when the teachers themselves fear writing, and believe that their pupils should only write in a language in which the teachers themselves are not comfortable writing? Pupils in the Intermediate Phase are not writing letters or stories either. They do not have enough English words to write in English, and there are no incentives to try to do this in Xhosa. In schools attended by mainly first language speakers of English and Afrikaans, however, children are writing stories, letters and doing independent research which includes the writing of projects by Grade 4.<sup>8</sup> The gap, by Grade 4, between children in the township

---

<sup>8</sup> I am particularly aware of this gap, as I have been closely monitoring the literacy and language development of my own daughter who is currently in Grade 4, and comparing her progress with the pupils in classrooms which I visit elsewhere. When she was in Grade 3, she had the opportunity to read 250 books from a classroom book-box during the year. Children in township schools in Grade 3, during the same year, sometimes read only one class

schools, caught in an almost schizophrenic educational system, and those who begin in their home language and continue, undisturbed in their home language, is enormous. We have inherited the consequences of apartheid education and language policy. The teachers who have the greatest educational responsibility of all, namely to facilitate the development of competent reading and writing, themselves fear the written word, and are undermined by the hegemony of English. By ignoring this, we are *de facto* colluding with the extension and preservation of discriminatory educational practice, the results of which negatively determine the future of our children, our social relations and the economy of the country.

We have a situation where women have inherited the major responsibility for the education of the children of this country and yet they are not adequately prepared. I have made reference to teachers with whom I work, who are part of the teaching élite. They are already qualified and because of their proximity to a metropolitan area and an institution of higher education are able to participate in further training. Yet even with these advantages and even after they experience the liberation of writing themselves in Xhosa as part of their own educational development, the consequences of the second phase of apartheid education and the growing hegemony of English undermine what they practice in the classroom. Neither the DOE nor the provincial department of education has provided clear signposts for how to do anything other than continue as before. Teachers in the rural areas are less likely to be formally qualified and have little access to further training, so there is scant hope that literacy or other educational development will improve. Instead, there is overwhelming pressure that coerces teachers and pupils to pretend that teaching and learning takes place

---

reader during the entire year. My daughter has had both Afrikaans and Xhosa as second and third languages since Grade 1, but I know that she could not, now read and understand the Afrikaans, let alone Xhosa, equivalent of a Grade 1 numeracy book if she were expected to do her mathematics through either of these two languages. Yet we expect our Grade 1 African language-speaking pupils to make sense of numeracy materials written in English in Grade 1. What are we doing to the majority of children in our classrooms?



through English. Of those who start out at school, we currently expect only 27% of pupils to emerge with a Grade 12 school-leaving certificate (Heugh 2000b). Despite an annual investment in education of 22% of the national budget, we are not removing the educational inequalities in our society that currently disadvantage women even more than men. We are also not contributing towards the validation of African languages for the purposes of speaking, listening, reading or writing through the education system. The likelihood of hearing the voices of women, reading their words and learning from them, if they speak languages other than English, continues to be remote in the South Africa of the twenty-first century.

The question arises as to why it is that the national Department of Education (DOE) has not insisted upon the implementation of a new language in education policy. There are several reasons which are offered. Some of these have to do with the Department's own ambivalence towards that matter of language in education. The discussion of languages in education during the overhaul of the curriculum relegated language to one of eight learning areas and so it was never addressed comprehensively as the conduit for all learning and teaching. The separate formulation of a language in education policy has never been integrated into the curriculum discussions. The language issue is continually put on the back burner, so to speak. Thus at the DOE's workshop in January 2000 at which a review of Curriculum 2005 was launched, departmental officials were reluctant to discuss the issue of through which languages the new curriculum would be taught and resourced (Heugh 2000b). To compound matters, there are several misconceptions about languages in education in South Africa, which have been used to confuse senior officials in the Department. These include the perceptions or beliefs that:

- most African language speaking parents want English mainly education from Grade 1;

- the idea that there is no significant South African research which demonstrates that bilingual/dual medium education can work;
- that the country can only afford English mainly education.

There is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to support these misconceptions. Rather there is overwhelming evidence, which demonstrates the reverse (see Alexander 2000, Heugh 2000b). The PANSALB Survey referred to above shows that in fact only 12% of people believe that English should be the main language of education in the country (MarkData-PANSALB 2000b&c). There is overwhelming support for the primacy and maintenance of the first/home language in education.

There are, of course, speakers of African languages who have made it through the education system as successful speakers of English. Often these are children from middle-class and/ or professional homes. The international literature shows that children from middle class homes are likely to succeed at school whether or not the first language is the medium of instruction. They are, though in the minority—to which the literacy statistics attest. The hope which accompanied the new Constitutions of 1993 and 1996, the theoretical support of multilingualism and language rights, and new changes in educational policy have not yet found concrete application in our society. Rural people, particularly women, who speak African languages are left on the fringes of communicative participation. If the gap between those who are literate and proficient in English were to widen then it is those, who are most significantly affected now, who will feel it all the more. Rather than building bridges of communication between the centre and the fringe, we are strengthening the language of power as the language of a shrinking, increasingly monolingual élite, and standing aside whilst the functional use of languages of the proletariat shrivels. A withering of the oral literary tradition in African literatures is an inevitable consequence of the increased status and value accorded English. If we want to see a more promising outlook for vibrant and multilingual literatures in and from South Africa, we need to nurture



our languages in the school setting and grant them greater respect in the formal domains of governance and service provision.

*Kathleen HEUGH*<sup>9</sup>



## REFERENCES

- Alexander, N. "English Unassailable but Unattainable." PRAESA Occasional Papers No 3 (Cape Town: PRAESA, 2000), n. pag.
- Bloch, C. "The Potential of Early Childhood for Developing and Sustaining Literacy." *Social Dynamics* 25.1. 1999, n. pag.
- Department of Education. *Curriculum 2005: Lifelong Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Pretoria: Department of Education, 1997a).
- . "Announcement by the Minister of Education." *Language in Education Policy* 1997b, n. pag.
- Haarhoff, T.J. *The Stranger at the Gate* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938).
- Heugh, K. "Disabling and Enabling: Implications of Language Policy Trends in South Africa." *Language and Social History: Studies in South African Sociolinguistics*. Ed. R. Mesthrie (Cape Town: Heinemann, 1995), n. pag.
- . "Multilingual Voices - Monolingual Texts and Messages: Isolation and the Crumbling of Bridges." *Agenda* 46, 2000a, 21-33.
- . "Beyond Myths and Legends: Languages other Than and Alongside English - *or why not?*" PRAESA Occasional Papers (Cape Town: PRAESA, 2000b) (forthcoming).
- Komarek, K. "Education for all African Children: The State of 'Organised Communication' in the Classroom Paper." UNESCO Conference on Education for All (Dakar: UNESCO, 2000).

---

<sup>9</sup> Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, University of Cape Town, December 2000.

- Macdonald, C. "Crossing the Threshold into Standard Three." *Main Report of the Threshold Project* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1990), n. pag.
- Macdonald, C. and E. Burrows. *Eager to Talk and Learn and Think: Bilingual primary education in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1991).
- Malherbe, E.G. *The Bilingual School* (Johannesburg: Central News Agency, 1943).
- . *The Bilingual School* (London: Longman, 1946).
- Minister of Arts, Culture, Science & Technology. *Pan South African Language Board Act* (Pretoria: DACST and Government Printer, 1995).
- Minister of Arts, Culture, Science & Technology. *Pan South African Language Board Amendment Act* (Pretoria: DACST and Government Printer, 1999).
- Organization of African Unity. "The Language Plan of Action for Africa." 22nd Ordinary Session of the Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity, Addis Ababa, 28-30 July 1986. N. pag.
- MarkData-PANSALB. *Language and Language Interaction in South Africa: Brief Descriptive Overview of the Findings of a National Survey Undertaken on Behalf of the Pan South African Language Board* (Pretoria: PANSALB, 2000a).
- . *Summary of the Findings of A Sociolinguistic Survey on Language Use and Language Interaction in South Africa* (Pretoria: PANSALB, 2000b).
- . *Language and Language Interaction in South Africa. Brief Overview of the Findings of a National Survey Undertaken on Behalf of the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB)*. (Pretoria: PANSALB, October 2000c).
- Organisation of African Unity. "The Language Plan of Action for Africa." 22nd Ordinary Session of the Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity, Addis Ababa, 28-30 July 1986. N. pag.
- . *The Language Plan of Action for Africa* (Dakar: OAU, 1986).
- Pluddemann, P., Mati X. and B. Mahlalela-Thusi. "Problems and Possibilities in Multilingual Classrooms in the Western Cape." PRAESA Occasional Papers No5 (Cape Town: PRAESA, 2000), n. pag.
- SAIRR. *South Africa Survey 1999/2000* (Johannesburg: SAIRR, 2000).

Snow, C. M. S. Bums and P. Griffin (eds.). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998).

———. Seminar Held in the Department of Didactics. University of the Western Cape. 1 Aug. 2000.

Strauss, J. P. *Results of the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) Project* (Bloemfontein: University of the Free State and Department of Education, 1999).

Republic of South Africa. *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Act 108 of 1996*. RSA.

Vesely, R. "Multilingual Environments for Survival: The Impact of English on Xhosa-Speaking Students in Cape Town." PRAESA Occasional Papers No 5 (Cape Town: PRAESA, 2000), n. pag.