



HAL
open science

Every Road from Babel Leads to Jerusalem: the Role of Language in the New South Africa

Sibusio H. Madondo

► **To cite this version:**

Sibusio H. Madondo. Every Road from Babel Leads to Jerusalem: the Role of Language in the New South Africa. *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 1999, Languages and Education: Parameters for Multicultural South Africa, 18, pp.102-112. hal-02346452

HAL Id: hal-02346452

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02346452>

Submitted on 5 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.

Every Road from Babel Leads to Jerusalem: The Role of Language in the New South Africa

Preamble

Language, popular or intellectual, considered diachronically or synchronically, and education, formal or informal, form the core of a society. No society can exist without these two phenomena and therefore neither of them is peripheral. Whilst the symbiotic existence of language and education is undeniable, one should also note that if they are not properly applied, they are likely to create a rift in a society and give rise to invidious situations such as xenophobia and civil wars among rambunctious nations.

At this stage, it is worthwhile to conceptualise the terms *language* and *education* in order to understand their meaning and their role in society. In most Indo-European cognates the word *language*, a spoken word, shares the common semantic root with the organ of speech, the tongue. The Greek word *γλῶσσα*, the Latin *lingua*, which has given birth to the Italian *lingua* and *linguaggio*, the French *langue* and *langage*, the Spanish *lengua* and *lenguaje* and the Rumanian *limbă*, the North Irish *teanga*, the Swedish *tunga* and the Danish *tunga* all express the spoken word and the instrument of speech. In most South African languages, the common root for both language and tongue is *-limi* or *-limu*. In iconographies the language is usually portrayed in a form of a flame that destroys and purifies. The symbolism of language paradoxically combines two contrasting dichotomies, that of creation and ruin. According to the cosmogonic myths of the Bible, God created the world through the theurgical spoken word and in this manner a language is considered to be

a means of creation, a unifying factor for a nation. On the other hand, a language becomes a symbol of conflict and ruin through the lips of a slanderer whose indecorously lancinating words are described by acidulous adjectives such as *acerbic*, 'astringently sour, harsh-tasting', *vitriolic*, 'sulphuric acid or sulphate' and *acrimonious*, 'bitter in manner or temper'. The contrasting parallel of a language as a symbol of creation and a unifying factor is illustrated in the retributive myth of the Tower of Babel where the presumptuous man's hubris is punished by the confusion of languages and results in misunderstanding and social disintegration. On the other level, the myth of the Tower of Babel and its archetypes should be read as the origin of different languages.

All in all, a language, whether used to express solemnity or eulogy, calumny or diatribe, is one of the important features of a society. A language is a pedigree that reflects a social history of a people and at the same time represents their peculiar essence. The fact that the name of a language is linked to that of a people and their geographical territory is cogent proof that a language embodies a people's identity. As a nation's indispensable means of cultural resurgence, a language can be understood as another side of culture:

Now how can this be explained? The relationship between language and culture is an exceedingly complicated one. In the first place, language can be said to be a result of culture: the language which is spoken by one population is a total reflection of the total culture of the population. But one can also say that language is a *part* of culture. It is one of those many things which make up a culture [...]. In the third place, language can be said to be a *condition* of culture, and this in two different ways. First, it is a condition of culture in a diachronic way, because it is mostly through the language that we learn about our own culture — we are taught by our parents, we are scolded, we are congratulated, with language. But also, from a much more theoretical point of view, language can be said to be a *condition* of culture because the material out of which language is built is of the same type as the material out of which the whole culture is built: logical relations, oppositions, correlations, and the like. Language, from this point of view, may appear as laying a kind of

foundation for the more complex structures which correspond to the different aspects of culture (Levi-Strauss 68-69).

As a symbol of autochthonous ethnicity, collingual nationalism and officious racism, a language may form the basis of social discrimination, xenophobia and political disenfranchisement. Hence in the vestigial pages of the history of the democratic society of Athens, the word barbarian (*βάρβαρος*) designated a foreigner who could not pronounce the Greek language but babbled cacophonous sounds that made no sense. Many right-wing political treatises bristle with examples of such linguistic priggishness¹.

It is therefore evident that over-emphasised language consciousness results in ethnicity and xenophobia which relegate the other to a subhuman level and promote the ignominious ideas such as the one of a *herrenvolk* or a master race. Racism and xenophobia in language are further exacerbated by the fact that in Western thought the foreigner is conceived in terms of an uncivilised, uncultivated world, the forest. The English word, *foreigner*, originates from the Latin word *silva forestis*, for a wood outside a park.

On the other hand, education is a *sine qua non* rite of passage for a youth to the norms and customs of a society. The word *education*, considered in its etymological sense, implies an act of social awareness and intellectual transformation, an opening towards the other in friendship or love. Education is a process of being, during which an individual learns to interact meaningfully and efficiently with the other, and at the same time, it permits one to distinguish one's self from the common multitude. Hence the etymology of the Romance language words for teaching, Italian *insegnare*, French *enseigner* and Spanish *enseñar* derived from the Latin *insignare*, for *insignire* meaning to "distinguish, to mark" is based on the root *insignis* which signifies "remarkable, notable or

¹.According to a Nazi 'scientist', Herman Gauch: "The Nordic race alone can emit sounds of untroubled clearness, whereas among non-Nordics the pronunciation is [...] noises made by animals, such as barking, sniffing, snoring, squeaking [...] that birds can learn to talk before the other animals is explained by the fact that their mouths are Nordic in structure." (quoted by Fishman 11).

distinguished". Like a language, education is a mirror of a society. As a result, a person is judged, condemned and accepted as a mature member of a society through his education. Unlike language, proper education (not indoctrination) does not offer any room for discrimination as it encourages inquisitiveness and promotes bridging the gap with the other. Though inextricably intertwined by the fact that education depends utterly on the existence of a medium of communication, language can be manipulated to instigate racial tensions and promote illusory racial superiority. In fact, good education treats all cultures as equal and deserving of scientific investigation. Good education simultaneously benefits the society that dispenses it as well as other nations.

Divide ut regnes: Apartheid and Ethnolinguism

In the South African socio-political situation, influenced by the Machiavellian apophthegm of *divide et impera* (divide and rule), language and education have been manipulated to promote racial discrimination, white supremacy or *baasskap* and to keep Blacks in an asthenic position. South African languages spoken in black communities were used to foment inter-ethnic skirmishes, to erect tribal fences, to inculcate xenophobia in people's minds and to relegate blacks to the lowest echelons of society by depriving them of the opportunity to learn and master international languages and develop their own languages. In fact, until 1994, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa recognised only two official languages: English and Afrikaans. The State regarded Afrikaans as the only national language since the Afrikaner nation was considered the only white nation in South Africa. As a result, when the *Broederbond* was formed, one of its chief aims was to promote acculturation and the absorption of the English into the Afrikaner nation. In order to curb English domination and the undermining of Afrikaans culture and language, the South African government had to postpone the development of television channels. Moreover, the *Broederbond* stipulated rules to promote the Afrikaans language:

Here are some examples of the instructions to broeders on the promotion of the Afrikaner, his language and other interests.

3/63/64: "Afrikaner doctors must be encouraged to ask in a friendly and tactful way that reports from the medical research institute be drawn up in Afrikaans. In this way the use of Afrikaans medical terms will be encouraged and people working on the reports will feel compelled to learn Afrikaans terms".

8/73/74 "During the summer holidays thousands of Afrikaners, including members (*of the Broederbond*), will scatter all over the country. Many opportunities will arise where our language can be promoted with courtesy and determination. An urgent appeal is made to our members to give an example in this way and influence others to do the same.

Afrikaans reading matter is often completely absent from waiting-rooms, hotels. Afrikaans newspapers are not made available in hotels. Menus are in English only, or in English and French. Service in Afrikaans is poor or just not available. These are only the few of the matters to which attention can be given.

6/75/76/ "One of our branches draws attention to the fact that our members can do a lot to prevent genuine Afrikaans historical place-names being replaced by un-Afrikaans names. The branch mentions the example of *Vogelstuisbult* having become Copperton."

"After representations by the FAK (*) to South African Airways it has been disclosed that airways tickets will be available in Afrikaans from January 2 1977 for internal flights. Members should please insist that their tickets are in Afrikaans." [...]

4/70/71: "Members draw attention to the need to maintain our language through the singing of sporting and school songs. It is noticed that many Afrikaans schools sing English songs at sports meetings. Members in the educational field should use their influence to accord our language its rightful place" (Wilkins and Strydom 143-44).

As for Blacks, the architect of Apartheid, Hendrik Verwoed put it point-blank that they had no place in a white South Africa and that they only had to learn a little English and Afrikaans in order to be able to take instructions from the white masters and to run errands. Later on, Afrikaans was to become a medium of instruction for the majority of schools in Soweto and this led to the 1976 uprising because the intention was not to promote communication but to establish Afrikaner supremacy and to render black South Africans incapable of expressing their plight to the international community. To aggravate ethnic tensions, linguistic maps were used by cartographers to demarcate Bantustan frontiers when the notorious system of Separate Development or Homeland Rule came into force. South Africa was then partitioned into ten ethnolinguistic homelands: Transkei and Ciskei (Xhosa), KwaZulu (Zulu), Lebowa (Northern Sotho), Venda (Venda), Gazankulu (Shangan and Tsonga), Bophuthatswana (Tswana), Qwaqwa (Southern Sotho), KwaNgwane (Swazi) and kwaNdebele (Ndebele). The purpose of the homelands was to deprive

Blacks of their South African citizenship as demonstrated by the argument of then Minister of Bantu Administration and Development, Dr Connie Mulder that:

If our policy is taken to its logical conclusion as far as the black people are concerned, there will not be one black man with South African citizenship...Every black man in South Africa will eventually be accommodated in some independent new state in this honourable way and there will no longer be a moral obligation on this parliament to accommodate these people politically².

Having been stripped of their South African nationality, disenfranchised and denied free movement within the Republic, black South Africans were re-registered in the Homelands corresponding to their ethnic origins. The Apartheid regime succeeded in diverting the attention of various ethnic groups from demanding political rights. Political parties based on ethnicity developed to enforce the homeland ideology and to promote cultural interests of ethnic groups. Political activists who championed for national unity were continuously involved in diatribes with ethnic leaders as well as the Apartheid regime. The black community experienced politico-cultural schism. On the one hand, there were the nationalists who were in favour of a united democratic South Africa, and on the other, there were the *ethnicians* who perforce embraced the Apartheid ideology of self-determination and ethnic consciousness. Hence, during the last stages of Apartheid rule, South African society was fissioned by at least three major ideologies: Apartheid (racism), nationalism and ethnicity. Since the Apartheid regime presented ethnicity as nationalism, it is imperative to distinguish between the two ideologies in order to understand the present socio-linguistic situation of South Africa. It is true that the etymological distinction of these two terms catapults one into an impasse. Though the two words derive from the same Indo-European root, it is impossible to figure either the *terminus a quo* or the *terminus ad quo* in their distinctive use. In fact, the Greek *ἔθνος* or *λαός* has been considered as synonymous to the Latin *gēns*, *nātiō* and *populus*, the Italian *popolo*, *nazione*, *gente*, the French *peuple*, *nation*, the Spanish, *pueblo*, *nación* and the Rumanian *popor* and *națiune*. While the Greek *ἔθνος* (*Ἔθνος* in Homeric prosody) places emphasis on common

².South African Hansard, 7 February 1978, col. 579.

culture as a unifying factor for a people, as it shares the same semantic root with the word *ἔθος* for "custom or usage", the Latin *nātiō* is derived from the past participle *natus* originally meaning 'birth' and underscores consanguineous relationship. The New Testament attests the trite usage of word *ἔθνος* having acquired the sense of exclusivity equivalent to the Hebrew *gōyīm* meaning "pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish, Gentile, heathen, pagan" as opposed to the *λαός Ἰσραήλ*. A similar process took place in the Latin language where the *populus Romānus* or *Latīnus* employed in the sense of the Hebrew 'am were frequently contrasted with *gēns* and *natīō*. It is interesting to note that the religious distinction of the words *nation* and *ethnic* as contained in the New Testament underlines social inequalities. *Nation*, used in relation to the religion and the political affiliation of the speaker or the writer, expressed a certain superiority as compared to that of an *ethnoi*, who is portrayed as a social outcast occupying an inferior position. Hence, in South Africa Black ethnic groups were referred to as non-believers or *kaffirs*. All in all, one is led to believe that a nation is composed of different unified *ethnoi* and that a nation is a reflection of cultural plurality and political unity:

A nation is an ethnic group whose leaders have either achieved, or aspire to achieve, a state where its cultural group is hegemonic. Nations are thus usually constituted on the basis of ethnicity. Weak nations, [...] fail to convince their members of their common destiny (very often such actions cannot be based on existing ethnicities but seek to invent it). [...], strong nations, conversely, have succeeded in persuading their members that they are indeed 'the same kind of people' — they identify with the nation-state. Like modern ethnic groups, nations depend on ideologies of *metaphoric kinship* in order to be successful. These are ideologies which, like kinship ideologies, stress horizontal solidarity between members, justified with reference to common descent and 'blood ties' — and which limit the compass of that solidarity to that group. 'My country, right or wrong' (Eriksen 42-43).

On the other hand, ethnicity refers to ethnic awareness of a given *ἔθνος*, of their affinity based on their difference to the other *ethnoi* and their common *ethnonym* and putative ancestral descent, permanent cultural features and distinctive psychological traits. Ethnic identification is the essential primordial distinctive feature that binds together members of a *Gemeinschaft* and has overtones of fraternity and familial unity. Ethnicity as an attitude based on territorial contiguity and contact with the

other, enthused by pride and chauvinism may lead to intolerance, mistrust and prejudice:

Ethnicity is "peopleness" i.e. belonging to or pertaining to a phenomenologically complete, separate, historically deep cultural collectivity, a collectivity polarised on perceived authenticity. This "belonging" is experienced and interpreted physically (biologically), behaviorally (culturally) and phenomenologically (intuitively). Where it is experienced or attributed on only one or another of these three dimensions it might easily be reduced to other constructs, but characterized as it is on all three, it is a very mystic, moving and powerful link with the past and an energizer with respect to the present and future. It is fraught with moral imperatives, with obligations to "one's own kind", and with wisdoms, rewards and properties that are both tangible and intangible. Above all, in its quiescent state, it is part of the warp-and-woof of daily life, part of all the customs, traditions, ceremonies and interpretations related to the collectivity that is defined by them, distinguished by them and responsible for them. As such, it is language-related to a very high and natural degree, both overtly (imbedded as it is in verbal culture implying as it does structurally dependent institutions) and covertly (the supreme symbol system quintessentially symbolizes its users and distinguished between them and others). Indeed, this is so to such a degree that language and ethnic authenticity may come to be viewed as highly interdependent. Thus it is that ethnicity is focused on authenticity (continuity of being, of doing and of knowing) while it is as modifiable (both in content and in saliency) and as manipulable (that is: consciously used as a basis of mobilization) as are other bases of human aggregation (economic, religious, ideological, political) focused on other assumptions and other dimensions³.

In a normal hegemonic nation, ethnicity and ethnic interests should not supersede nationalism and the drive for nation building. Ethnic interests should be set aside, though not completely neglected, to promote national unity, nationalism and *nationness*. Ethnic groups should be allowed to develop without detriment to the nation.

Up the creek without a paddle: The new South African language plan

The repeal of Apartheid laws in 1994 and the democratisation of South Africa ushered a new era of the Government of National Unity and led to the abolition of ethnolingual buffer states and the creation of provinces. The present South African Constitution recognises eleven official languages: English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Northern Sotho,

³. Joshua A. Fishman: *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival*, op.cit., pp.70-71.

Southern Sotho, Swazi, Venda, Ndebele and Tsonga. The constitution further recognises the existence of other languages such as German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Koi, Nama, the San languages, the sign languages and other languages used by communities in South Africa. The Language Plan for South Africa puts an accent on the promotion of language equity and multilingualism:

Multilingualism is a distinct asset, and a culture of multilingualism must be promoted. As has been indicated throughout this Report, the emphasis on only one language (e.g. English) can be particularly disadvantageous in a multilingual country such as South Africa, inter alia in the sense that a monolingual approach discounts the knowledge which exists in societies where English is not prominent, and is likely to lead to the failure of development schemes. If one wants to establish development schemes successfully in rural communities, or if one wants to deliver services efficiently, one needs to know what the members of the community need and consider appropriate, and one needs to involve the community as participants in the process, with a feeling of ownership. This can be facilitated by the use of community languages.⁴

The recommendation of multilingualism based on the present eleven official languages puts the Language Task Group and the Pan South African Language Board up the creek without a paddle, in that all the languages in question are syntactically and semantically of the same family. It is not clear how the plan intends to do away with ethnic elements introduced to the eleven languages during the Apartheid era. The fact that the eleven languages are recognised as official and equal in status reads like a conundrum and seems to buttress the ideology of ethnic awareness rather than the national one.

The question of resources (e.g. financial constraints) in developing the eleven official languages, including the Afro-Indo-European heritage languages, is likely to hamper the effective application of the language policy. Incipient ethnicity is becoming apparent, since certain ethnic groups are already protesting against excruciating discrimination in that certain official languages enjoy more attention than others. The most

⁴ *Towards a National Language Plan for South Africa: Final Report of the Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG)*, Presented to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Dr B.S. Ngubane, 8 August 1996, p. 113.

salient point about the current language policy is that though national unity is at stake, national interests including unifying factors seem to be sacrificed in favour of ethnolinguistic classification of South African Black languages. Discussions on the regrouping and the standardisation of Nguni and Sotho are continually brushed aside and discussed as detail of South African linguistic history⁵. Divisions based on geographical position contrasting the North and the South that are used to distinguish the Sotho languages are a solid proof of the unscientific nature of the actual linguistic classification used in the language plan. The fact that the separatist stance was adopted in the classification of the black South African languages shows that no effort has been made to rise above ethnic confines and emphasise scientifically proven linguistic cognateness of all black languages. An integrationist posture sustained by a more scientific classification of all black South African languages and a slight effort to curb ethnicity could help the country extricate itself from its linguistic quagmire and attain the cherished ideology of national unity. Socio-linguistics and anthropological linguistics could be utilised fruitfully to attain this end.

Dr Hyacinth MADONDO⁶

REFERENCES

- Alexander, Neville.** *Azania: An Essay* (Cape Town: Buch, 1989).
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland.** "Ethnicity and Nationalism: Definitions and Critical Reflections" in *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Formation and Identity and Dynamics of Conflicts in the 1990s*, Edited by Helena Lindholm.
- Fishman, Joshua A.** *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on Language and Ethnicity* (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1984).

⁵. See Alexander "Language Planning and National Unity in South Africa," 62-65, and "Towards a National Language Plan for South Africa," 76-78.

⁶ UNISA

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*, Translated from the French by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grandfest Schoepf (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963).

Wilkins, Ivor and Strydom, Hans. *The Super-Afrikaners: Inside the Afrikaner Broederbond* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1978).

