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Opening the Debate: Questions by an Outsider

Being an admirer of South African literature, I feel like reading you a poem written in Zulu by Benedict Vilakazi around 1932, when he was about to enter the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. It was translated into English and published much later. You will easily recognize, from this description, the central block and its Corinthian columns.

Wo, Ngitshele Mntanomlungu!
Tell me, White man's son!
Tell, O tell me, white man's son,
The reason you have brought me here!
I come, but O my knees are heavy
And, when I think, my head is dizzy:
I feel confused, unhappy, lost,
And day is no less dark than night.

Tell, O tell me, white man's son,
Where shall I enter through these walls?
My father's father said when dying,
My home would be a Zulu hut
Where I, besmirched with smoke and soot,
Should eat boiled mealies mixed with whey.

Tell, O tell me, white man's son,
Why I am here and where I belong:
The colour of my skin condemns me,
My language—to me so beautiful,
A constant source of love and pride—
Brings sneers of scorn to many lips.

Tell, O tell me, white man's son,
What path I took to lose my way!
The walls surrounding me are high;
They go down deeply in the earth
And rise up high towards the clouds:
The Mboza warriors at Nodwengu
Never saw such sights as these.

> Tell, O tell me, white man's son,
> The meaning of all I see about me:
> Such massive and majestic columns,
> Drawing my gaze where, high above me,
> Doves are perched whose noisy cooing
> Is like the bellowing of bulls.
>
> Thus, as I gaze around in wonder,
> I realize beyond all doubt
> That I am lost! Yet well I know I came
> To serve my own beloved people—
> Aware of them always, I hear them cry:
> "Take up your burden and be our voice!" (Vilakazi 84-5)

Zulu Horizons... I surmise every participant in this congress wants to change his/her horizons, as far as education and languages are concerned. Indeed, Vilakazi was well aware of these fundamental issues when he told us: "Take up your burden and be our voice."

A few days ago, a congress was organized here in Saint Denis to celebrate the abolition of slavery which took place here in 1848. At that time, there were still 62,000 slaves living in bondage. We also celebrated this anniversary in Montpellier, which caused me to read again the ancestor of African literatures, *The Life of Olaudah Equianao*, a Nigerian slave, published in London in 1789, as well as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in the USA in 1845. In spite of obvious differences, these two books proclaim the same message. And both writers show us how instruction is the only possible key for a real liberation, not that of the body alone, but also that of the mind. They consider the learning of a language is the only means of becoming a free man. If one can read, write and speak the language of the masters, then the masters will have to listen to those they had put in fetters. Through this instruction, the people will be given a voice. A people who cannot speak or write will remain without a voice, and after some time, it will tend to disappear from the political stage. Your President, Nelson Mandela, was well aware of this necessity when he tried to organize a sort of university while in jail. To him, education is also a tool of liberation:

> Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine-

> worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another. (Mandela 194)

If education had been the absolute priority for many African states after they had reached independence, there is no doubt that things would have moved forward much faster, for it is also the engine of development.

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I should like to speak in concrete terms, and from experience. I spent some time teaching in a secondary school, after which I worked in a Training College for women, where I learnt much about the training of teachers in the elementary school. Then I taught linguistics at the university, where I was also in charge of the training of teachers, as well as of an interdisciplinary Research Center (CERPANA) in African Literatures. I taught in Senegal, in Burkina Faso and in the Ivory Coast, and later in your country, in Pietermaritzburg and in the Cape. I apologize for being so personal, but this is only to explain my attitude. I know I am not a South African, I know I can only speak as a foreigner, as a "uitlander," but I surmise you might be interested in hearing about the point of view of an "outsider": in some cases, distanciation can help.

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The great issue we are now confronted with could be summarized thus: what kind of relationship could be established between society and education? Or, better put, what kind of relationship could be established between society and education as they *were* and as we would like them to be. Can we change this society through education? Or is it society that will change education? Personally, I tend to believe that education can participate in this change, but it is society that will decide. According to some French sociologists (Durkheim, Bourdieu, Passeron et al), the pressure exerted by society on the educational system is so strong that the schooling system can only reproduce the demands of this society for the maintenance of the privileges of the dominant group. This

theory could be discussed, but I think there are two points we should keep in mind: we must be under no delusion as to the powers of education, and always remember that any discussion on the subject is bound to be of a political order in the etymological sense of the word, since we are dealing with the future of the nation.

And in the case of South Africa, this pressure is all the more formidable after half a century of apartheid and of Bantu education. Moreover, repealing a legislation of segregation does not necessarily mean that mentalities and attitudes, whether you be White, Coloured, Indian or African, will follow. It will take a long time for this to happen, possibly several generations, and in this regard, education can help. But it may also stand in the way as we could see in Vryburg, where after the legislation of 1996 enacting the opening of schools to Non-Whites, 150 African students — from what I could read in the French press, and I hope they got it right — were gathered within an English department, while 600 Whites were gathered in an Afrikaans department, causing no end of incidents in March 1998: this was like furthering another form of segregation. But I do realize that one could quote many counter examples. I felt, reading a book published two years ago by June Bram and Pippa Visser (*A New History for a New South Africa*) that a huge amount of work was being done for the teaching of a new history in textbooks running counter to the "school version" of accepted history. I think it is all about a society that remains to be invented since it has never existed yet.

In spite of crime, of a pervading violence, in spite of Aids, in spite of the many problems raised by a lost generation that refused to go to school because of a boycott policy, in spite of decades of a "gutter education," French people feel that there is hope for your country because there is courage. We were all impressed by the tremendous work done by the TRC, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Whenever a society has to go through a historical trauma, which was the case with apartheid, then, in the following years, it has to go into mourning. Sometimes, if it is not properly done, this mourning activity may tend to become a never ending one, a kind of "impossible mourning."[1] We must get rid of the burden of the past, in terms of guilt, if we want to move forward. I wish we

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[1] See A. and M. Mitscherlich.

had organized a TRC after the Dreyfus affair, after the Second World War and the Shoah, or after the Algerian war. These subjects, in my country, are still surrounded with taboos. And forgiving does not imply forgetting the past.

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This being said, here are a series of questions, at least six of them, which we cannot avoid and which I should like to raise. It will be for you to decide, during this congress, whether you feel concerned by the reactions of an outsider.

Question N° 1. Is language alone?

Is language only a medium allowing exchanges within a group and between various human groups? There are people who believe that language is also to be taken as the foundation stone of the identity of a group. But whenever I go to Switzerland, I can hear a variety of French, a variety of German, and a variety of Italian. And yet, the Swiss have a very strong feeling of their identity, in spite of a multilingual system of education. The same, of course, could be said of your country. During the years of apartheid, I used to meet in London many South African writers living in exile there, and I could soon notice that in spite of a pervading segregation, they were all feeling homesick and were all sharing a very strong feeling of belonging, a sort of South African pride. Perhaps we should be more careful, and speak of language as the marker of an identity.

I suppose we shall all agree that language is above all a bearer of culture in the anthropological sense of the word, of systems of representation, of a *Weltanschauung*. Perhaps we could remember what the great Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, wrote on this in his *Decolonizing the Mind, the Politics of Language in African Literature*:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and other beings. Language is thus insepara-

ble from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (Thiong'o 16)

More questions ensue: Is there such a thing as a pure identity? Is there such a thing as a pure culture? Is there such a thing as a pure language? Or is there such a thing as a pure race?

Question N° 2. Can we think of change without having in mind the process of resistance to change?

This process has been very well analysed by the American school of sociology. We do know that change, as such, induces resistance to change. And this resistance can be all the more damaging when a society has tried to impose the views of one of its minorities. I think I should now quote from a great author who noticed, some time ago, that "No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth the new: for he saith, the old is better" (St Luke, V, 39).

Question N° 3. Should we change things from the top, or from the bottom?

In my country, we always tend to make decisions from the top, to make sure the unity of the nation is maintained. This is a very old tradition which was reinforced during the French Revolution and afterwards. Segregated South Africa also gave much credit to bureaucracy and red tape by issuing no end of parliamentary acts on education and languages. As we all know, this is a damaging system. But could not the opposite system lead to another form of balkanization?

Question N° 4. What's to be done with models?

Judging by the literature published on the subject, very often, you seem to show a great interest for what has been done, in terms of education and languages, in other countries which are then quoted as possible models, such as the USA (especially regarding the policy of "positive discrimination"), Australia, Zimbabwe, etc. The French policy is never cited as a model one could draw on, and naturally enough, we could feel hurt by this lack of interest. And yet, I think there is something

one could learn from the French model. Our policy, in terms of the teaching of languages, has always been a very simple one: the learning of one language and one language only, the variety of French that has been established by the Academy and which was to be taught all over the country. This you can easily notice as you drive through the country, with the same type of school buildings always imposing their mark upon the landscape, as a means to remind you of the unity of the educational system, irrespective of local architecture. It has quite a few advantages, since it makes communication much easier, from South to North, from East to West, which was not the case during the 17th century, when each region had its own language. But it also has disadvantages as it resulted in a general crushing down of differences, of regional identities and cultures. At the end of the 19th century, children were not even allowed to speak in their vernacular (Basque, Catalan, Occitan in the south, Breton in the north, etc.) on the playground, and if they were caught, the master would give them a wooden stick. The next step was how to get rid of this stick by inciting others to use the vernacular. At the end of the day, the last to hold the stick was to be punished by the schoolmaster. In Brittany, things were made worse by the use of a wooden clog, instead of a wooden stick, thus reminding the children of their peasant origin. If language can be a source of pride, it can be a terrible source of humiliation and resentment when it is considered as inferior. This, Vilakazi must have felt very strongly when he told us: "My language — to me so beautiful, / A constant source of love and pride — / Brings sneers of scorn to many lips."

The refusal to give way to a multilingual policy, the imposition of one language were supposed to reinforce national unity and to establish equality between all learners. This was our republican ideal. The same policy was to be applied in the colonies where "assimilation" was the general rule, and the "chicotte" took the place of the wooden stick. In 1924, an Act of Parliament stipulated that in Africa "French is the only language to be used in schools. Schoolmasters are not allowed to use a vernacular with their pupils (Moumouni 55)." In 1915, in Haiti, Edmond Laforest decided to commit suicide (Michelman 216). He went on top of a bridge and jumped into the water with a "Grand Larousse," a big French dictionary, hanging from his neck, to make sure he would get drowned.

This suicide was highly symbolic, implying a language had caused his death. There is no doubt a linguistic hegemony may lead to the cultural imperialism of a dominant group: perhaps the French case could be quoted at least as a counter-example.

Indeed, as a counter argument, one could quote the pleasure, the joy of multilingualism or of bilingualism. Some of your writers always celebrated the delight they took in shifting from one language to another. When we invited him to a congress we had organized in Montpellier on African literature and languages, André Brink explained how happy he felt when he could write either in Afrikaans or in English, each language providing him with a different vista.[2] Uys Krige had already praised the virtues of bilingualism, and the same could be said of Breyten Breytenbach, or of Mazisi Kunene shifting from Zulu to English.

But is it *that* simple? How are you to communicate with a system of eleven languages? Isn't this going to be another source of endless ambiguities? Lewis Nkosi, one of your great African writers and an excellent critic, once told me about an incident which took place during a congress. Ngugi wa Thiong'o was also attending, and as could be expected he delivered a long speech denouncing the imperialism of English crushing down African cultures and their expression in the vernacular. And logically enough, he ended by speaking in Gikuyu. Of course, not knowing this language, Nkosi could not understand a single word in that part of his speech. So, in his turn, he stood up and answered Ngugi in Zulu, which left him nonplussed. Nkosi then told him: "All right, friend, let's have it in English, if we want to communicate!" This is something we should remember.

If we want to discuss the matter in earnest terms, we should not be afraid of accepting contradictions, of weighing pros and cons, for people who refuse contradictions often become single-minded or fanatical. You might be interested to know that in my country, at the moment, we are witnessing a re-emergence of regional cultures and languages which are beginning to be taught at the nursery school

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[2] See *Nouvelles du Sud*, "Littératures africaines: dans quelle(s) langue(s) ?" Yaounde: Silex. 1997.

(Catalan, Occitan). This is also being discussed in this island, where some trade unions claim the right to teach Creole at school. And a treatise is about to be signed within the European Community for the promotion and teaching of regional languages.

Let us get back to South Africa. It would be interesting to know how you would react to this quote from *Negotiating the Past, the Making of Memory in South Africa*, a book that has just been edited by Sarah Nutall and Carli Coetzee: "Proponents of multilingualism thus become ideological captives of the system they are seeking to challenge" (Nuttall, Coetzee 245). Could not the development of vernacular languages lead to another form of division, or should the hegemony of one language be the price to be paid for the unity of the nation, with all the disadvantages I quoted above?

But once more, it is not that simple. If there is, for example, the necessity to teach Zulu, which variety of this language is it going to be? Is it going to be literary and standard Zulu, the sort of language Kunene uses in his epics, or the urbanized variety currently used in urban areas? According to R. K. Herbert, this would amount to the teaching of a foreign language. If we are to teach French at the university, which variety is it going to be? Is it going to be the French of Molière, of Malraux or Proust, or the French of commerce, of trade, of the banking system, and of tourism? As teachers, we are committed to making choices. Making a choice is like making a sacrifice: there are priorities we must take into account. The role of the university is, among others, to think of the future of our students, and we know that in terms of jobs, there is much more of an opportunity for their future in your country in the teaching of commercial French than in the teaching of literary French.

There is such a complexity in South African problems that we may wonder whether drawing from models can be of any help. Could we speak, then, of an irreducible South African specificity? But could not this lead to more isolation, or to a political alibi? Would you agree with the report circulated this very year (sponsored by the NECC, National Education Committee) by Cross, Mkwanazi-Twala et al. (*Dealing with Diversity in South African Education, a Debate on the Politics of a*

National Curriculum) stating that the only solution would be "the Dialectic of Unity and Diversity in Education"?

Question N° 5. Do you still believe in linguistics? Do you consider linguistics is the only tool, the solution?

It is very dangerous for specialists of languages to meet in a caucus, because in that case we may tend to indulge in all kinds of wishful thinking. Are we going to forget about the others, about our next-door neighbours at the university? I persist in believing that an interdisciplinary approach is an absolute necessity for correct and efficient training of teachers. We need the help and collaboration of other fields of research. And this may lead us to more questions.

1- Can we train the teachers of languages in linguistics only, or should we also train teachers about the various theories of learning existing now, from behaviorism (Skinner) to constructivism (Piaget) or cognitivism? Can a teacher use a textbook, a computer, audio-visual aids, or any teaching method, without being well informed on their whereabouts, or about their ideological parameters? The way a language is going to be taught in the class-room is also a political problem.

2- Can we train teachers without informing them about group psychology, group dynamics (Lewin et al.), that is about language as an instrument of communication within the class-room? Teaching activities present the student with models of authority. But which models of authority? Autocratic lecturing, with a staunch separation between teachers and students, in the name of efficiency? Or with a desire on the part of the teacher for the students to reach their gradual independence through a systematic organization of exchanges with other members in the class-room, whatever their colour may be, and through active participation? Is the student to be taken as a *tabula rasa*, as a mere target for "learning," or as a possible source of information for the teacher as well as for his students? For the teacher, as a figure of authority, which he undoubtedly is, also induces patterns of behaviour, which I surmise is of some importance within an African environment.

3- Can we train teachers without telling them about the psychology of the child and of adolescence, or about the culture they belong to, which often does not correspond to that of the master or mistress?

4- Can we teach a language without getting some information about the sociology of education, especially regarding the social and cultural environment of the school we are teaching in?

5- What about the terrible problem of "levels"? "Streaming," in my country as well as in the States and in other parts of the world, has always gained some favour among teachers. The solution is valid in the short term, allowing the weaker ones to catch up with the better ones. And it does give some satisfaction to the teacher who is always left in a quandary: for whom is it I am actually teaching, is it for the better ones, or for the weaker ones? But couldn't this policy amount, in the long term, to another form of segregation? Which cultural community, after some time, is going to take advantage of this system? This has been very often debated in my country, where after some time we began to discover that our ideal, *i.e.* "equality for all" was perhaps nothing but a mere pedagogical delusion. Last month, in an interview published in the new periodical *Leadership*, your President, Mr Nelson Mandela, was wondering if one could speak of equality when a student has to work in a house where there is no electricity, while another can work in a house supplied with electricity, not to mention the student who has a fine cultural environment, with educated parents, whereas more than one half of the African population is still illiterate. Some statements made by South African teachers which I could read in the press left me perplexed ("our teachers see children, not colour"). Could this mean that they have suddenly turned colour-blind? In my country, I often heard the same type of assertion, in a different context: "When a child enters the class-room, he is the equal of others." Is this not what I called earlier a form of wishful thinking? For children are unequal in terms of their linguistic performances. This is something we should be aware of. Couldn't interactive pedagogy afford another and more interesting situation of learning, where through team work, the better ones could help the weaker ones, thus possibly breaking

the barriers of race, culture and sex, by openly making room for differences? Or is this another pedagogical delusion?[3]

6- A teacher of languages is by no means innocent. By teaching languages, we also transmit models and patterns of behaviour, especially in terms of gender. I remember how in my country as well as in French-speaking Africa, some years ago, for early learners of English, textbooks showed us Mummy staying in the kitchen, cooking and looking after the children, while Daddy drove off to work in a posh car. Nowadays, due to some research work done by sociologists of education, we can see, what a change, women at work and Daddy taking care of the little ones, or helping in the kitchen. The problem remains all the more true, I think, within the South African background, for reasons everybody knows.

Question N° 6. Can teachers work by themselves? A question with its answer...

I apologize, as this time, I am going to answer that question directly. To me, speaking from experience, the answer is a definite NO, we cannot. I think that as trainers of teachers we must think of the relationship that should be established—this is something colleagues often dislike for mere reasons of power—between the school and the outside world, parents, cultural associations, trade unions, associations of students, etc. This has already been done in South Africa in the last years. I was very much struck and impressed by two examples of cultural centres where the school children are taking an active part. The first was in Johannesburg, the "Afrika Museum," and the second in Cape Town, where the "District Six Museum" plays a similar role. District Six, which has been often celebrated by Alex La Guma and Richard Rive, especially in his *Buckingham Palace, District Six* (1986), which gave us a remarkable example of how a community could organize its resistance to the Forced Removals. The past is not something the younger ones should forget about, but on the contrary, as André Brink explains it, our duty is "to reclaim some of the historical land from the sea of oblivion or of accepted versions"(qtd. in Nuttall and Coetzee 41).

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[3] This runs counter to the sociological theory propounded in Bourdieu and Passeron.

Resistance to change comes mainly from a possible isolation, and therefore alienation, of the schooling system. Change is made much easier through exchange with the outside world. It is also made possible with a sharing of powers through contact with the others: it gives the required distanciation.

Teachers are in dire need, all over the world, of a sound training, initial and throughout their career. They need proficiency on a purely academic level, but also in other fields of research. You could contradict me by telling me this is over ambitious, we cannot afford it. To which I shall answer this is not over ambitious, this is quite realistic, it corresponds to the demands of society and to the needs of the teacher. We can afford it: the university is well equipped for this. Besides, in the case of South Africa, due to years of Bantu education, the system has undergone a form of degradation, it has lost some of its prestige, especially in African surroundings. As an outsider, I could quote what M. Mbulelo Mzamane, Vice Chancellor of the University of Fort Hare, has to say on this[4]: "The teaching profession in South Africa fell into serious disrepute."

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How are you going to re-establish unity for the "Rainbow Nation"? I sometimes wonder if it is not a problem of sticking back together a vase that was broken by history. And I do remember what the writer Derek Walcott remarked on the subject when he delivered his speech on being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of the original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the crackled heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars.

He was then alluding to the colonial fracture of Antillean society. A South African specialist on matters of adult education at the University of the Cape, Ingrid de Kok, made an interesting commentary on this

[4] In Dealing with Diversity in South African Education (Bourdieu & Passeron 50).

speech: "The gluing together may be the key function of art and cultural education in a time of social change, but it involves seeing and feeling the fragmented, mutilated shards, before the white scar can be celebrated" (qtd. in Nuttall and Coetzee 52).

Perhaps some people feel like inventing a new vase. Is this feasible? What shape for the future? Is it going to be like new wine in new bottles, or old wine in new bottles, or new wine in old bottles? It can no longer be, contrary to the opinion of wine tasters, old wine in old bottles. From what I have been told, it is time for a drink.

Jean Sévry [5]

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