Some of the Metaphors about Language Planning Discourses in South Africa : Boundaries, Frontiers and Commodification

Sinfree Makoni

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Dr Sinfree Makoni
University of The Western Cape[1]

Introduction

By evoking various metaphors, this paper seeks to examine critically some of the assumptions about language in language planning discourses in South Africa. The following are the three main ways in which the construction of language has been metaphorised in discourses about language:

i) language as a discrete category (the boundaries phenomena)
ii) language as an interpenetrateable phenomena (the frontiers metaphor)
iii) language as a commodifiable entity

Contextualising the paper

Language planning policy can be loosely interpreted as an organised pursuit to language problems typically at a national level. Typically, this would involve discussions about which languages to be accorded official recognition, and the role which some of the languages could play in education. In South Africa, the debates involve also the amount of air time some languages should be accorded in the media *i.e.* radio and T.V. This, how-

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[1] University of the Western Cape, Department of Linguistics, Private Bag X17, Bellville, 7535 South Africa.

ever, does not preclude debates at a local level. Indeed this paper will seek to demonstrate that arguments about language planning policies at a national level are guided by metaphors about language which are different from those influencing the conceptualisation of language from local perspectives.

In the apartheid era, debates about the various language planning policy options which a future government in a post-apartheid era could follow were extremely controversial because language policy was interpreted by all the protagonists as a vehicle through which different political ideologies could be articulated. Since the announcement in April 1994 by the New Democratic government that South Africa will officially recognise eleven languages, the debate has now shifted from a discussion of policy options to the implementability of the policy. Because language implementation requires a long-term perspective, the discourse about language policy will soon begin to address issues about sustainability as well.

In the apartheid era, Afrikaans and English were the only two officially recognised languages in South Africa. In addition to the above two, nine other languages have been recently granted official status as well. The following table lists the number of languages officially recognised in South Africa and the estimated number of speakers of each language. South Africa has an estimated total population of approximately 40 million. The following table accounts for 98 % of the population. The remaining 2 % is made up of community languages, also referred to as heritage languages such as Hebrew, Gugurati, etc., which have not been granted official recognition. Beside heritage languages, another notable language which has not been granted official recognition is Fanakalo, a South African pidgin spoken mainly in the mines.

Zulu	21.95%	8.8 million
Xhosa	17.03%	6.8 million
Afrikaans	15.03%	6.0 million
Northern Sotho	9.64%	3.8 million
English	9.01%	3.6 million
Tswana	8.59%	3.4 million
Southern Sotho	6.73%	2.7 million
Tsonga	4.35%	1.8 million
Swati	2.57%	1.0 million

Venda	2.22%	0.9 million
Ndebele	1.55%	0.6 million

Sources: Ridge 1994.

The announcement that South Africa will officially recognise eleven languages, and the entrenchment of language rights in the transitional Constitution was welcomed as an improvement of a past situation in which only English and Afrikaans were recognised and there were no language rights entrenched in the Constitution.

Language as discrete entities: The boundaries of metaphor and the Occam's razor principle

"In the process of interaction between state and citizens particular speech forms get converted by the state into languages; they become reified as social facts which are mutually exclusive."[2] The creation of mutually exclusive speech forms gives rise to a way of thinking about language which can be neatly captured by the boundaries metaphor. The boundaries metaphor is based on the assumption that speech forms fall into separate boxes in spite of the fact that one can walk from the Southern most tip of South Africa to the Northern most point without being able to identify a specific point where one language ends and another begins.

The imposition of determinate linguistic boundaries on speech forms is typical of a top-down approach to language (starting from the assumption of the existence of diverse languages). The discourse of boundaries is also typical of language planning approaches which address language problems in terms of national, international, continental and inter-continental relations[3].

Paradoxically, in Africa and indeed even more so in South Africa the boundaries conceptualisation of language which creates insiders and outsiders is also typical of colonialist and neo-apartheid discourses about language. Le Page and Tabournet-Keller citing a Bantu linguist argue that the "existence of separate labelled (African) languages is a British innovation expedited by the work of Clement Doke and other like-minded linguists"

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[2] R., Fardon and G., Furniss, (eds). *African Languages, Development and the State.* (London, Routledge. 1994).

[3] Ibid, 3.

with a dualist orientation to issues about language.[4] It is linguists who decided to elevate Hurutse at the expense of other dialects in forming standard Tswana. They sought to divide the Sotho in the North from their cousins in the South using language as a dividing instrument. The point I am trying to make here is that in some situations the "bounded" notion of language violates the Occam's razor principle because it results in a creation of more "languages" than would be necessary.

The "boxing" of African speech forms into different languages is reinforced by state, legal and educational pressures. In South Africa when children enter school they have a mother tongue designated to them even though the language may be as alien to them as English (Street, 1993). The essence of the point Street is making is that the speech forms most African children encounter during their primary socialisation are so radically different from the ones they encounter at school, even in situations in which they are supposed to be receiving instruction through their mother tongue, that I would like to argue that they are receiving the benefit of step tongue and not mother tongue instruction. One way in which the drift between the language of primary socialisation and the language in step tongue instruction could be restrained is through a process of restandardisation. The restandardisation would mean that the speech forms used as media of instruction would begin to resemble more closely those used in local communities in which the children live. In order for this to happen, it is necessary to liberate ourselves from "boxing" speech forms.

One of the socio-linguistic consequences of a top-down perspective about language is its reification arising from a separation of language from its users, as is demonstrated by the entrenchment of language rights in the constitution and not the rights of the language users. One also seriously doubts the extent to which the language rights of all the speakers of the eleven official languages can be said to be honoured, if the constitution in which those rights are entrenched is available in English and Afrikaans only.

The announcement of the eleven official South African languages and their subsequent entrenchment in the constitution has the effects of conflating language and standardisation by aligning itself with those codes which, for one reason or other, have already been standardised. Such an announcement has the effects of creating the impression that the complex relationship between language and dialect has been fixed. Experience from other parts of Africa has demonstrated that such fixing cannot be easily achieved.

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[4] R. B. Le Page and A. Tabouret-Keller. *Acts of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1985).

Bamgbose cites an interesting example which supports the dynamic nature of the relationship between languages and dialects.[5] Using examples drawn from Ghana, he shows that the differences in dialects between Twi and Fante which were magnified in the immediate post-independent period (Ghana obtained its independence from Britain in 1957) to the status of separate languages are now being considerably downplayed ; consequently the number of languages which Ghana has 37 years after independence is in decline.

> The converse also does apply. The Efik-Ibibio dialect cluster in Nigeria for years has been accepted as practically one language with Efik as the literary form of the language. The position is now being reversed and Ibibio is more and more being emphasised as a separate language. The trend is likely to be intensified with the creation of a new state in 1997 in which the Ibibio form the dominant group.[6]

The upshot of the argument is that there is nothing magical in the number of languages which a country officially recognises because whether speech forms are recognised as separate languages or dialects of the same language does change across time, with the Ghanaian example illustrating a situation in which differences between boundaries are downplayed, whereas the Nigerian experience demonstrates the converse: the differences are being magnified.

The list and the map as discursive conventions in the boundaries metaphor

The list and the linguistic atlas are the two main ways in which the boundaries metaphor is represented.

— *The List*

After the speech forms have been converted into discrete boxes, a demographic process is then set in motion. In the demographic process, the number of speakers of each of the boxes is counted. A list is then presented reflecting the number of mother tongue speakers of each of the various languages. Implicit in the listing strategy is a view of the relative strength of each language partially dependent upon the number of mother tongue speakers of that particular language. There are two main weaknesses with the listing strategy. One of the limitations is peculiar to South Africa and another is more gen-

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[5] A. Bamgbose. "Pride and Prejudice in Multilingualism and Development" *in* R. Fardon and G. Furniss, (eds.) 1994. 33- 44.

[6] Ibid., 34.

eral. The demographic data for users of African languages in South Africa is notoriously unreliable. The data about the number of speakers was collected on the basis of aerial photographs in 1980 rather than on the basis of thorough going surveys. The listing strategy also overlooks the fact that simply enumerating the number of mother tongue speakers of each box (language) may not be adequate; it may be necessary as Derive[7] cautiously remind us that frequency of usage of the languages may just be as important as the number of speakers — if not even more important.

— The Linguistic Atlas

Another discursive practice whose conventions for the representation of language are influenced by the boundaries metaphor is the linguistic atlas. The map shows how speakers of different languages are geographically distributed and consequently language becomes *objectified spatially.* Because the map "orders" language in a two dimensional space, the reader has to appeal to other socio-linguistic processes in order to understand why certain speech forms are regarded as an instance of a language and not a dialect and vice versa. Furthermore language maps will also be hard pressed to represent any area in terms of more than one salient language. Thus, for instance in some maps a large part of the Western Cape is represented in terms of Afrikaans only, when in the urban areas there are clearly a large number of other languages spoken in addition to Afrikaans. The discourse of the language map is susceptible to perpetrating a myth of monolingualism when multilingualism might be the norm.

Discourse of the Pan South African Language Board

Another type of convention whose principles of talking about language are closely related to those of the linguistic atlas is the Pan South African Board. The linguistic map distributes languages *geographically* but the Pan South African board distributes them *functionally* according to the role and purposes the languages are to play in the various sectors. In other words, the discourse conventions of the linguistic map are concerned with geographic location, while the Pan South African Language Board is preoccupied with sectoral location.

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[7] J., Derive and Derive, M.J., " Francophonie et pratique linguistique en Côte d'Ivoire, " *in* N. M. Ngalasso and A. Ricard (eds). *Des langues et des Etats, Politique Africaine 23.* (Paris: Katthala. 1992), 1985 : 45.

In spite of the importance attached to functional location by the Pan South African Language Board, the board does not officially recognise the role played by Fanakalo in South African mines. I would like to argue that a recognition of the importance of Fanakalo would have rehabilitated its image and begun the process of dispensing with the apartheid and colonialist baggage the language carries, thus creating opportunities for raising its status and consequently setting in motion a series of processes which would subsequently lead to its elaboration and standardisation. Unfortunately, the Pan South African Board is too bureaucratic in its thinking to adopt such a revolutionary policy. It would require, as Laitin put it,[8] a populist government keen on gaining and consolidating its political capital to recognise speech forms such as Fanakalo since they are held in painful disregard by bureaucrats and in some cases even by those who speak them.

The idea of languages for certain sectors is often construed to mean that some languages, or indeed varieties of languages, are appropriate for certain levels. Whereas the linguistic map divides people geographically, the division occurs sectorally in the discourse of the Pan South African Language Board.

But perhaps such a distinction is inevitable because, as Whitley insists,[9] it might always be necessary to make choices at different levels and that even within a single institution, *e.g.* the educational or legal system, it may not be prudent to opt for a unilingual solution because "it is always necessary to be aware of differential function and of the presence of variable domains within uniform will . . . Efficiency is not necessarily always achieved by uniformity, rather by sympathetic understanding of complex demands and dynamic uncertainty." [10] Thus, for instance, English and Afrikaans may have a similar distribution in South Africa since they are both used as media of instruction in tertiary education. The differences may, however, be of scope and extent since English has a much wider distribution than Afrikaans.

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[8] D. Laitin. *Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992).

[9] W. Whitley, (ed.). *Language in Kenya* (Oxford University Press. 1974).

[10] A. Davies, (ed) *Language in Education in Africa.* Seminar Proceedings at the Centre of African Studies. (The University of Edinburgh. 1986), 8.

Language frontiers

Another type of metaphoric description of language which is radically different from the boundaries metaphor and the listing and linguistic atlas conventions which are associated with the boundaries metaphor, is the frontiers metaphor. The frontiers metaphor is strongly influenced by micro-ethnographic research, particularly the work of Gumperz (1971); Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1989), etc.. Micro-ethnographic approaches prioritise local level language practices, arguing that discourses which discuss language as discrete and more or less given, misrepresent the socio-linguistic situation on the ground. Thus, for Le Page, the language or languages an individual uses cannot be determined by his/her geographical location but by the identity which he/she seeks to project at any individual moment.

Giddens uses the phrase "the reflexive project of the self" [11] to deny the existence of a fixed identity and by extension a fixed bounded language. Within a perspective which places emphasis on local practices, identity is interactionally accomplished and since individuals engage in different communicative acts, their identity is also consequently a variable one.

What is revealed from a micro-ethnographic perspective is that language and language boundaries are permeable and therefore language should be seen as interpenetrateable, hence the appropriacy of the frontiers metaphor. Research within the frontiers metaphor tradition emphasises how, in spite of the large number of languages cited within the boundaries tradition, it is rare to find any extended conversations within a single language because "conversations drift into and out of particular languages as the subject matter and register require," making it difficult in some cases to determine in which language the conversation occurrs, because the languages are in a state of semi-permanent mixture. Language is therefore construed to be a multilayered and interconnected chain, offering a range of options in terms of registers and styles depending on how the user seeks to align himself to changing circumstances.

Permanent mixture creates conditions felicitous to the creolisation of African speech forms. It is interesting to note that the creolisation of African languages is taking place without the languages having gone through a pre-creole stage. This situation chal-

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[11] A. Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity: self and society in the late modern Age* (Polity Press, Cambridge. 1991).

lenges the view that a creole necessarily has to have its origins in a pidgin. The situation of a creole without a preceding pidgin is not unique to South Africa, it has also been reported in Réunion. Baker and Corne[12] demonstrate that a creole was established in Réunion because of the presence of a large proportion of white French native speakers without a pidgin emerging.

Because the frontiers metaphor is sensitive to local language practices the information it provides would be invaluable in addressing the "step tongue syndrome" because it provides insight into true community usage.

The commodification of Language

The third and last type of metaphor which I would like to explore in relation to language is the one which has its origins in the world of commerce *i.e.* the commodification metaphor. The discourse of acquisitional planning discusses language in terms of a commodity. The commodification of language manifests itself most clearly in the domain of second and foreign language learning and teaching.[13] Fairclough[14] succinctly describes the commodification of language as the "process whereby social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrow economic sense of goods for sale come nevertheless to be organised and conceptualised in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption." The commodification of language has been taken to its most extreme extent by the British Council in its promotion of English language. Teaching is now described as an industry, as the following quotation from the Director General of the British Council John Hanson C. B. E. says in the 1992/3 British Council annual report:

> The global spread of the English language is fundamental to Britain's trade, culture and development. English Language Teaching (E. L. T.) is therefore one of the main pillars of the Council's overseas operations. It is closely integrated with other elements of our work, particularly the promotion of British arts and education, and is a significant element of Britain's aid programme in many Third World countries. It also brings major earnings to British publishers and suppliers of E. L. T. materials.

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[12] P. Baker and C. Corne. *Isle De France Creole* (Karoma: Ann Arbor. 1982).

[13] Coulmas, F. *Language and the Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell. 1992).

[14] N. FaircLough. *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press. 1992), 206.

The commodification of English differs from the commodification of African languages in South Africa, whereas the commodification of English is promoted by a British institution manned largely by the British. The commodification of African languages is a European project seeking to promote African languages by making knowledge of an African language a strong recommendation for a job.

The commodification reflects the extent to which discursive practices about language have come to be dominated by the world of economics. The impact of the process of commodification is felt in two ways. First, language learners are seen as clients or customers who may opt to buy one or more of the eleven commodities. The commodification of language conjures up a socio-linguistic situation in which languages are in competition and not in a complementary relationship with each other.

Secondly, if the eleven languages are seen as commodities in competition with one another, the competition is unfortunately not a fair one. For example, if all the eleven official languages as construed in the boundaries metaphor were to function as media of instruction (putting aside the step tongue phenomena), materials would have to be provided in each of the individual languages. Provision of these materials is very expensive and requires a high degree of expertise. Hard economic realities mean that governments have to rely heavily on commercial publishers. "Unfortunately because economies of scale dictate that publishers invest in instructional materials for languages with relatively large numbers of speakers, it means that languages with relatively few speakers may not receive fair treatment." [15] This may perpetuate a situation inherited from the apartheid era in which some languages are accorded fewer resources than others, a form of linguistic racism which Phillipson in an apt but emotive description describes as "lingualism."

Central to the commodification of language is the notion of the market value of language. In this type of discourse the idea that language is a commodity is seen as justifiable because acquiring a second foreign language is costly both to the individual and society. In the South African context, as I pointed out earlier, knowledge of an African language is seen as economically exploitable because it is linked to the provision of jobs, as the following advertisement illustrates.

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[15] S. Makoni. "The Futility of being held captive by Language Policy Issues in South African Applied Linguistics", *Perlinguam*, Vol. 12: 12 - 21. (1993), 17.

> SABC Radio News has three vacancies for experienced reporters in its Johannesburg news office.
>
> Two of the posts will go to Sesotho-speaking reporters, although an ability to speak several South African languages will in all cases be an advantage. We are looking for energetic people with drive and enthusiasm, lively curiosity and a good news sense. Applicants must be prepared to work odd hours. A driver's licence and typing skills are essential. Radio experience, a good broadcasting voice and computer literacy could all be advantageous.

In the Western Cape, if the educational system cannot successfully meet the demands for African languages a niche would be created for the private entrepreneur. Demands for African languages will likely lead to more people wanting to learn them. This has what Coulmas calls a "snowball" effect because the more people learn a language, the more useful it becomes; and the more useful it becomes the more people want to learn it. In the South African context, another argument may also have to be used: opportunities for learning languages were formerly so few and so unsatisfactory that the desire has accumulated. Both teachers and learners are benefiting from arrears. The number of people learning a language is however not a perfect criterion of the value of that language to a community. For instance, there is a considerably large number of students learning Latin at the University of the Western Cape. Hopefully, this does not reflect the value attached to Latin in that community, but is simply a case of continued intellectual misinvestment.

The commodification metaphor of a language also has some in-built self contradictions. On the one hand language is commodified through dictionaries and grammar books which objectify and reify the vocabulary of a language by turning it into potential material resources. On the other hand, language is an intangible commodity. When a student pays to learn a language, the teacher does not diminish his resources by teaching.

Marketing South African languages — Marketing a new South Africa

There are some interesting parallels in the way African languages are being marketed and the way English is being marketed in the former Eastern European countries. In the former Eastern European countries, English is being marketed as the language which facilitates democracy, free markets, etc.. In South Africa, African languages are being marketed as the languages which facilitate integration into a new democratic South Africa. In both cases, learning either English or an African language is projected as a symbolic

acceptance of a new era. The languages are being marketed not for some "undefined communicative purposes" but because they are a reflection of specific ideology.[16]

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to explore three various ways of talking about language, arguing that the manner in which language is constructed depends on the manner in which we talk about it. I have also argued that there is tension between a "bounded" conception of language and one which places emphasis on local practices (frontiers metaphor). I have concluded the paper by demonstrating how discourses about language are not only influenced by state apparatus but by the world of commerce as well.

[16] R. Phillipson and T. Skutnabb-Kangas. "English panacea or pandemic." *Sociolinguistica*. Special issue on English only. (1994).

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