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# Language and National Unity in a Post-Apartheid South Africa

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As South Africa moves towards a new dispensation, apartheid seems set to become an historical curiosity. Although one cannot be sure what the language policy of a new government will be, it seems likely that it will not resemble the one adopted by the apartheid state. If apartheid wanted to tribalise and actively encourage separate languages, the new South Africa seems more likely to move in the opposite direction.

National unity will be stressed in the new South Africa. It is a unity which apartheid has systematically denied and discouraged through its divide and rule policies. However, even if many have come to see through the separate ten 'homeland' nations created, can the same be said of the separate nine black languages that have been actively encouraged and codified as linguistic adjuncts to apartheid's homeland infrastructures? The answer, in many cases, is no. Many now merely accept these supposedly separate and different languages as a 'given'.

## **The Legacy of Divide-and-Rule Policies**

The Afrikaner Nationalism built on and systematized the colonial British divide-and-rule policy. Since whites constituted a minority of South Africa's population, the most effective way to rule was to prevent the 75% black-African population from cohering into a unified group. A key means of achieving this was an active state-sponsored encouragement of African tribalism in South Africa. The central feature of apartheid was the creation of tribal political 'homelands' (originally called 'Bantustans'), each tied to a separate black 'nation' with their own language. The 'nations' and 'national languages'

engineered into existence in this way were: Transkei and Ciskei (the 'national language' of both of these was Xhosa); Kwa-Zulu ('national language' Zulu); Bophuthatswana (Tswana); Lebowa (North Sotho); Qwa Qwa (South Sotho); Venda (Venda); Gazankulu (Tsonga); Kangwane (Swazi); and KwaNdebele (Ndebele).

These national languages and the homelands have more to do with the geo-political divide-and-rule needs of apartheid than with linguistic criteria. More sensibly, South Africa has three main language-clusters: Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and Ndebele), Sotho (North Sotho, South Sotho and Tswana), and Afrikaans. Some 85% of South Africans fall into one of these three linguistic categories (ie. 46% Nguni; 23% Sotho; and 16% Afrikaans). The only significant black minority languages are located in the north-eastern Transvaal, namely Venda and Tsonga. (Venda is closely related to the Zimbabwean Shona language, while most Tsonga-speakers live in southern Mozambique). The Venda and Tsonga minorities together only constitute about 5% of the total South African population. English (the home language of about 8% of the population) is largely city-based in South Africa.

So naturalised have the languages developed by apartheid's separate nationalisms become, that many now believe that South Africa has nine reified and 'given' black languages. This reified view of language is closely tied to the notion of culture as an historically given and inherited phenomenon. This view denies process and change in the formation of culture and language. Given the history of Afrikaans itself (as the result of a process of integration between Dutch, French, German, English and the indigenous Khoi), it is ironic that Afrikaner Nationalism became so wedded to the static view of language and culture.

### **Opposition to Apartheid's Language Policy**

From the 1950's until the 1970's the language issue disappeared from the anti-apartheid public platform. During this period the National Party (NP) imposed apartheid-language groups onto the country without opposition. Then from the mid-1970's to mid-1980's Black Consciousness (BC) thinkers began challenging the NP's language policy. These BC theorists proposed having only English as the national language. English was seen as a potential tool for creating national unity around one language.

A significant shift in the debate about language came in 1989 with

the publication of Neville Alexander's *Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania*. Alexander rejected both the NP and BC language policies. Since 1989 the National Language Project (NLP) has been the focus of the most sustained work in the field of South African language policy formulation, especially in the area of language standardisation.

### **The Alexander-Nhlapo Proposal**

Neville Alexander of the NLP has proposed that in the process of de-apartheidising South Africa, one national language and two local languages be adopted. English is proposed as the national language and Nguni and Sotho as the two regional languages. He bases his argument on the idea that an international language is needed to communicate with the outside world. Alexander sees English as best serving this purpose. In proposing this language policy, Alexander uses Jacob Nhlapo's 1940's work on language. Nhlapo argued that there were only two main language-clusters in South Africa, namely: Nguni (of Natal, the eastern Cape, and the south eastern Transvaal) and Sotho (of the interior/highveld areas).

But, because the apartheid state has done so much language-engineering during the last 40 years, implementing Alexander's proposed language policy would be more difficult now than it would have been in Nhlapo's days. Today it means more than merely working out the most rational language policy: it means confronting separate apartheid languages that have taken on a degree of real material existence in the form of codifications and educative and media infrastructures (with all the vested interests which that implies). The apartheid state has spent a great deal of effort and money in dividing South Africans from one another. A key means of doing this has been to 'engineer' separate languages.

The Nguni-cluster was split into four languages/nations. The Sotho-cluster has been split into three languages/nations. These seven languages have been codified; taught at schools; used by the Radio Bantu channels and later by TV2 and TV3 channels. Schools have especially played a key role in teaching people to believe that they are Zulus or Xhosas or Tswanas, rather than South Africans (or for that matter Ngunis or Sothos). Through education the differences have been emphasized and made to seem 'natural'.

Since South Africa now supposedly has nine black languages, Nhlapo's proposal for the development of a standardised Nguni and

Sotho would be met by a degree of hostility in some quarters today. Jobs are now at stake. A whole industry has been built upon apartheid's language policy — book and dictionary-publishers, language research and codification centres, radio stations and, of course, those who teach and lecture these separate languages.

Alexander's reintroduction of Nhlapo's work into the current language debate was timely, given apartheid's disintegration. Alexander points to an important issue for the government of a future unified state to confront — what apartheid can put asunder (eg. South Sotho, Tswana and North Sotho), can surely be reintegrated? In place of separate languages and separate 'little nationalisms' (or tribalisms), South Africans can now work to unite the country instead.

Nhlapo's language rationalism scheme is valuable as a potential map for de-apartheidising our languages in a way that does *not* require massive linguistic imposition. Rather, one is talking about recodifying languages into more standardised versions of what already exists on the ground. It would not be very difficult to reintegrate say, South Sotho, Tswana and North Sotho. This new unified language could then be taught to the greater-Sotho language cluster stretching from Pietersburg to the Orange River. The same could be said of Zulu, Swazi, Ndebele and Xhosa.

Rationalising South African language-use *without* imposition, requires that policy formulators consider three, rather than two, regional languages — ie. Nguni (Natal, Eastern Cape and south-east Transvaal), Sotho (highveld areas) and Afrikaans (western and southern Cape).<sup>5</sup> After all, Afrikaans has become the indigenous language of the western/southern Cape, and southern Namibia.

### A Role for Media

There is also a need to consider the possible role that modern electronic media can play in creating a unified South Africa with one national and three regional languages. South Africans are moving (have moved?) *beyond* a culture in which the print media is dominant. Rather we now live in an era where the electronic-audio/visual media, like radio, television, videos, etc are assuming a position of dominance. It is possible that radio and TV may offer South Africans a number of potential opportunities for developing a unified national culture: what better means exists of promoting the use of a standardised Nguni or Sotho (and/or undoing the effects of apartheid's language tribalisation)? Radio and TV (as orally based and instantly

accessible media) can spread the use of a newly standardised language much more quickly than the medium of print.

Second, it is possible to promote a *single* unifying national message via these media *simultaneously*; and to do so in all four proposed languages (ie. Nguni, Sotho, Afrikaans and English). This gives one the best of all worlds by:

- Encouraging a single nationalism (ie. designing media that discourage separatist apartheid-derived nationalisms), but without substituting the chauvinism of any one language;
- Promoting the standardised languages identified in the national language policy; yet
- Promoting a single 'South African' nationalism in languages that are familiar.

Such are the possibilities offered by modern media technology.

Third, correctly used, such an electronic media infrastructure could also help to develop multi-lingualism. However, that would depend on what national education policy was being applied, as well as to what extent schools taught/encouraged children to relate to the multi-lingual environment (which would be easily accessible on radio/TV).

### **Overview of Available Language Policy Options**

Which language policy South Africans ultimately opt for remains to be decided in the course of the transition to a post-apartheid democratic society. At present four main proposals are in the running.

#### **Option One: The Laissez Faire Approach**

At least two different sorts of *laissez faire* language policy suggest themselves:

- An absolute hands-off approach. In reality this is not possible. Ultimately the state has to transact business and keep records in some language, and provide schooling in one, or in numerous languages, etc.
- A policy of treating 'all languages as equal'. This approach has been advocated by the ANC since its 1990 Harare Language Policy Workshop.<sup>6</sup> This amounts to a 'no policy at all' approach, and appears to be motivated by a 'do not know what to do' and/or 'let's not offend anyone' approach. Ironically, this may translate into Option Two of *de facto* reinforcing and encouraging the apartheid-derived 'language groups' if a future government carries

on providing state funding for language infrastructures created by the NP. In fact, this is an impossible 'policy' to implement from a cost point of view since it would amount to having to facilitate all government transactions and records in all the languages spoken in South Africa. (Taken to its logical conclusion, this would have to include language-rights for minority South African communities like: Tamil, Hindi, Portuguese, German, Greek etc). This would create a bureaucratic nightmare, that would probably become un-administrable).

### **Option Two: Reinforcing Existing Apartheid-Derived 'Language Groups'**

During the apartheid era the government actively created state-funded infrastructures to promote 'separate nationalisms'. The NP funded more than the promotion of Afrikaans; the Party also funded the promotion of Xhosa, Zulu, North Sotho, etc. Eleven languages have been *institutionalised* through school infrastructures, university departments and even Academies for the formalisation and development of these languages: English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, Ndebele, South Sotho, North Sotho, Tswana, Venda and Tsonga. The NP's current position on language is to retain the *status quo*.

Any post-apartheid government that continues to channel state funds into these existing infrastructures will be *de facto* reinforcing and encouraging the 'language groups' created to complement apartheid's divide-and-rule tribalising strategies.

These 'language groups' are now, to a considerable extent 'taken for granted' and unproblematically projected into the future by people across the political spectrum (eg. NP and ANC). This makes apartheid language policy the only aspect of Verwoerdian policy to have worked out the way in which the original apartheid social engineers intended. Ironically, removing the legacy of this apartheid language policy may now require another state intervention in the form of a language harmonisation policy.

### **Option Three: Imposing One 'National' Language (English)**

BC thinkers have advocated the imposition of English. Such a policy would represent the ultimate bureaucratic/top-down approach. This was tried by Lord Milner's administration after the British conquest of Southern Africa in 1902. It represents a bureaucratically 'rational'

solution given the status of English as an international language and the fairly wide-spread knowledge of this language in South Africa. But just as this sort of policy produced resentment amongst Afrikaners, so it will more than likely lead to new resentments in the future South Africa. In fact, it represents an over-rationalised top-down policy which ignores the *de facto* language situation on the ground. Ultimately, it is probably un-implementable.

#### **Option Four: A Modified Alexander-Nhlapo Option**

Alexander proposed English as the national language, and Nguni and Sotho as the main regional languages. I argue for modifying this into three regional languages: Nguni, Sotho and Afrikaans.

The advantages of having one national plus three regional languages are:

(i) Efficient state (and business) administration is facilitated by having one national language; (ii) it facilitates the 'de-apartheidisation' of language; but (iii) still allows for a recognition of the *de facto* linguistic diversity in the country, in a way that (iv) harmonizes seven languages into two. A well-implemented harmonization programme should offend none of those currently speaking the seven apartheid languages. Consequently, although it concedes much to the bureaucratic-rationalising impulse, it is less of a top-down approach, and less likely to offend people by forcing them to abandon using a language more-or-less familiar to them.

At a conference held at the University of the Western Cape on "Language Planning and Standardization", organized by the NLP in September 1991, support was expressed for: a rationalisation of Nguni and Sotho (and their adoption as two regional languages); the adoption of Afrikaans as another regional language; the use of English as South Africa's national (bureaucratic and business) language; and for giving state support to minority languages (like Venda and Tsonga) in the educational sphere. Only the future will tell if this is the pattern to be followed.



## Map: Languages in South Africa



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**Footnotes**

1. *"The History of Language Policy and Our Political Movements: A Brief Outline,"* **Language Policy Review**, Vol 5 No 2, 1990.
2. Summary of the National Language Project's Democratic Language Planning Proposals. NLP, Cape Town, 1991.
3. Crawhall, N. *"Why is Language Standardization an Issue for Workers and Peasants,"* **Language Projects Review**, Vol 5 No 4, 1991.
4. Alexander, N. **Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania**. Buchu Books, Cape Town, 1989.
5. Louw, P.E. Issues raised by Alexander's 'Language, Policy and National Unit', **Language Projects Review**, Vol 4, No 3, 1989.
6. Dessai, Z. *"Impressions of the Harare Language Workshop,"* **Language Projects Review**, Vol 5, No 2, 1990.