

# Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania



An essay  
by Neville Alexander

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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THIS ESSAY HAS BEEN WRITTEN in order to be read by as many people as possible inside South Africa. I would also be delighted if people abroad with an interest in South Africa find it useful.

My main aim is to try to show those who read this essay and especially those who are involved in educational, community, labour and youth projects, how important the language question is in the conduct of our struggle for national liberation. I want to persuade my readers to my view that, if approached from a historical point of view, language policy can become an instrument to unify our people instead of being the instrument of division which, for the most part, it is today. We need to make a democratically conceived language policy an integral part of our programme for national unity and national liberation.

For those readers who are interested in the more theoretical and professional aspects of the question, it may be useful to read the companion essay to this, which will be published soon by the University of Cape Town's Institute for the Study of Public Policy in their research programme entitled *Critical Choices for South African Society*. The preliminary research and seminar assistance on which this essay is to some extent based was made possible by a post-doctoral research fellowship of the University of Cape Town which I was able to use in the first half of 1988. My colleagues in the National Language Project and many individuals have helped to clarify my ideas, but in the final analysis, the essay is mine, warts and all.

*N.A. Cape Town, March 1989*

## CHAPTER 1

# THE LANGUAGE QUESTION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

WHAT IS 'THE LANGUAGE QUESTION'? Why should we want to write a book on this question? Surely, we have enough 'questions' or problems to worry about without adding another one to the long list? Why don't we first try to find answers to the racial question, the land question, the housing question, the wages question, the constitutional question and to all the other important questions in our country? Why is the language question so terribly important?

The answer to this question is extremely simple and straightforward, as I hope to show. But it is as well to stress that all these different 'questions' are part and parcel of one overriding question, viz., how do we abolish social inequality based on colour, class, religious beliefs, sex, language group or on any other basis? The answer to every one of the many questions that complicate our lives in South Africa must in the final analysis help to find answers to that larger question.

Let us try to put down the answer to our question why the issue of language is important in South Africa as clearly and logically as possible. Most people who are involved in the struggle against apartheid and racial discrimination believe that this struggle is one for national liberation or national democracy. In spite of the many differences that divide the anti-apartheid forces in South Africa, there is general agreement that in some sense we are building a nation by means of this struggle. Again, people have different ideas about what it means when we say we are

building a nation. But on one thing all are agreed, viz., that we are trying to bring about national unity; we are trying to encourage all our people to become conscious of the fact that they belong to one South African/Azanian nation.

In South Africa at this moment, building the nation means, among other things, fighting against racism and against ethnic divisions or ethnic consciousness. That is to say the promotion of non-racialism, anti-racism and anti-ethnicism or anti-tribalism is to a large extent the meaning of the phrase 'building the South African/Azanian nation'. For too many people unfortunately, words like non-racialism and anti-racism are no more than political slogans to be shouted at the top of one's voice in and out of season. This holier-than-thou attitude has made people forget that being non-racial or anti-racist is much more than not being this or being against that. Too few people realise that being non-racial or anti-racist means being *for* something. In our case in South Africa, even if it means more, it certainly means no less than being for a single nation and, therefore, for national unity.

Now, it is a fact that most people have a rather vague but none the less particular idea of what a nation is. Probably most people in South Africa today believe that the people who are part of the nation have got to speak the same language. This idea that nations are groups of people who speak a particular language under particular historical and geographical circumstances has come down to us from the experience of European nationalist movements during the last two hundred years or so. In Western Europe – we think of Portugal, Spain, Great Britain, France, Holland, and others – it is generally true that the vast majority of the people in the respective countries speak the national language, i.e. Portuguese, Spanish, English, French, Dutch, etc.

However, let us pause for a moment and consider the implications of accepting this point of view! Let us leave

aside the difficult question of what 'a particular language' means.<sup>1</sup> As soon as we ask ourselves: does this mean that the people of most African states are not 'nations', since they speak many languages?, it becomes clear that there is something wrong with this Eurocentric definition of 'a nation'. Surely, Zambians and Nigerians, Kenyans and Zaireans, Angolans and Algerians are nations and not just conglomerations of language groups?

Of course, there is a real basis for this widespread belief in the monolingualism or language exclusiveness of nations. The simple fact of the matter, after all, is that if people cannot speak to one another they cannot in fact constitute a nation. *The crucial question, however, is whether they have to speak to one another in one particular language in order to be a nation.* Is it not in fact a matter of communication rather than of this or that particular language? To put the matter differently: to be a nation, the individuals who make up that nation have got to be able, among other things, to communicate with one another. They need not, however, do so in any specific language. All that is necessary is that they be able to switch to the most appropriate language demanded by a particular situation.

There is more than enough evidence available that this is indeed what happens in most countries in the world today. Most of the nations of the modern world are in fact multilingual nations, i.e., the people who make up these nations have different home languages. In this regard, a

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<sup>1</sup> Most people think they know ('by intuition') where one 'language' ends and another begins. However, 'languages' become such not simply because sounds produced by human beings are understood by others. They get definition in the course of class struggles in the history of peoples. 'A language', in other words, is usually the result of political and economic developments in an area and not simply of particular rules of grammar and syntax.

very important book entitled *Imagined Communities* was published a few years ago by the English author Benedict Anderson. There, he shows very clearly that modern nations are usually not monolingual and that

Language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn any language ... Print languages is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se ... In a world in which the nation state is the overwhelming norm, all this means that nations can now be imagined without linguistic communality.

What we are saying, then, is that if we are serious about such ideas as non-racialism, anti-racism, anti-ethnicism, and others, we must, among other things, seek a democratic solution to the language question in our country. Racial prejudice and racism are without any doubt reinforced and maintained by language barriers.(as well as by group areas, separate schools, separate amenities, etc!). If we want to fight against racial prejudice and racism then we have, among other things, to break down the language barriers. How to do this so as to bring about maximum unity among our people is the meaning of a democratic solution to the language question in South Africa

The matter is urgent because the present government – like its predecessors – is pursuing a policy that goes in exactly the opposite direction. It is no exaggeration to say that in South Africa today, a historic decision has to be made by the people. The choice, in a nutshell, which confronts us is whether we are going to solve our problems in a federation or confederation of ethnic states based on language and ‘racial’ groups or in a non-racial, non-ethnic unitary state. In the final chapter of this book, we shall return to this point. For the moment, it is necessary only to establish the fact that the National Party and all those to the right of it link ‘race’, language and ‘culture’ in such a way that they inevitably and deliberately pursue the division.



not the unification, of the people of South Africa. As we shall see in the next chapter, their idea of a 'nation' is based on the experience of certain European peoples in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hence, language, nation and culture are for them different aspects of one and the same group of people. Quite logically, they end up with the absurd idea that in South Africa today, there are some twelve nations as well as two nations-to-be. Since these ideas accord very well with the economic and political domination of the white minority in this country, it is a perfect ideological instrument to sow division among the oppressed and exploited people. It is a tried and tested weapon of the rulers against the majority of the people.

Clearly, the oppressed people have to forge weapons out of the same materials so that they can defend themselves and break the domination of the ruling group. It is against this background that the language question in South Africa has to be considered. There is a wealth of literature on this question in many parts of the world. The sociology of language has become an accepted branch of the social sciences and many insights have been gained that are helpful in understanding our own situation. Although I shall not, generally speaking, concern myself with points of theory in this essay, it is none the less informed by a serious attempt to understand the relationships between language, class, exploitation, domination, nationalism, education, culture and ideology.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In the companion study referred to in the Preface, I have tried to look at some of the more uncertain aspects of the subject against the test of various theories.

## CHAPTER 2

# COLONIAL AND NEOCOLONIAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA 1652–1988

THE CONQUEST OF SOUTH AFRICA by Holland and Great Britain during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries was an integral part of the process of colonial-imperial expansion. This process was itself the result of the logic of capitalist development on a world scale. The economic, political and socio-cultural developments that accompanied this general process in the course of four centuries were similar in all parts of the colonial world, depending on the degree of subjugation and dispossession of the indigenous peoples concerned.

The language policies of the conquerors flowed out of the overall economic, political and cultural strategies that were adopted by the colonial-imperialist powers. In the early (mercantilist) period, no direct influence was exerted on the languages of the indigenous peoples. Interpreters – not always very reliable ones – became the main mediators between Europeans and Africans. Thus, during the first few years of the rule of the Dutch East India Company (D.E.I.C.) at the Cape, the officials were completely dependent on the linguistic skills of Autshomoa ('Harry'), Krotoa ('Eva'), Doman ('Anthony') and a few others for their very survival at this Cape of Storms. It is said that Autshomoa had actually been taken to Batavia in an English ship before the arrival of Van Riebeeck. He was referred to as 'the Ottentoo who speaks English'. There was never any serious or systematic attempt on the part of the colonists to acquire a knowledge of the local languages which, to them, sounded

like the clucking of turkeys.<sup>3</sup> According to Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson, 'the Europeans found Khoikhoi phonetics impossible. They could not pronounce the clicks'! In any case, the D.E.I.C., ever mindful of the need to reduce costs, decreed that 'the natives should learn our language, rather than we theirs'!

As the focus of Company policy shifted, however, from one of not very much trade with native people to one of erratic colonisation, the demand for labour led to a dramatic change in the nature and quality of communication between the Dutch colonists and the indigenous groups. In the Cape, the upshot of this new development, which began with the establishment of the first so-called free burghers along the Liesbeeck River in 1657, was the all but total disappearance of the Khoisan languages except for the area along the Orange River. The reason why some people along the banks of the Orange River continued to speak Khoisan languages has to do with the fact that the pressure of dispossession forced wave after wave of those who refused to become labour tenants on 'white' farms to flee into the arid northern districts and across the Orange River (the Gariëb) into what are now Namibia and Botswana.

The complementary development in the Western Cape was, of course, the rise of Afrikaans as a language. It has been said in a recent essay by Belcher that 'the story of Afrikaans is to a large extent the story of communication between white and brown in South Africa'. The author of this opinion maintains that within the short period of eight years, 'Afrikaans-Hollands' had been entrenched as the language of trade, politics, religion, education, negotiation and social intercourse between white and non-white at the

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<sup>3</sup> 'Belangende haer spraeck is eenengelyck ofte men een deel Calcoense hanen hoorden rasen: eeven gelyck is oock haer spraecke, daer van jy weynick anders cont hoorden als clocken ende fluyten' (quoted in Belcher 1987:18).

Cape. 'When the Khoikhoi later entered into the service of the settlers as childminders, stock herds and farm labourers ... i.e., together with the slaves. who performed the same kind of work. it also became the language of production in white-brown relations.'

Among East Indian slaves at the Cape, similar processes were leading to the emergence of a particular (*Bokaapse*) variety of 'Afrikaans-Hollands', a dialect related in complex ways to the growth of Islam at the Cape. Once a policy of (reluctant) colonisation had been decided upon by the D.E.I. C., the question of hegemony in all spheres of life inevitably presented itself. For the profit-conscious Company, it was axiomatic that all efforts had to be made to ensure that the absolute minimum was spent on anything, including, therefore, the necessary evil of brutal repression. All those who were in the employ of the Company or dependent on it – such as the free burghers – were subject to the most horrendous punishments for any transgression of any of the countless ordinances, and proclamations that straitjacketed the monopolistic empire of the merchant capitalists of Amsterdam, Holland and Zeeland. Slaves, Company officials and free burghers were treated in accordance with the repugnant and despotic practices of the time if they fell foul of the Company's interests. Only the Khoikhoi – as long as they were not incorporated in the colony – were exempt.

But all this was very expensive and labour-intensive. Like any other government, the Company had to try to minimise the use of force by gaining the consent of the governed.

In other words, it had to establish its legitimacy and hegemony on behalf of its masters in Holland. Consequently, half-hearted attempts were made to teach the (Dutch) 'Reformed religion' to the slaves and their children and to those Khoikhoi who were absorbed into the colony. Because of its mercantilist practices, the Company

never pursued these goals with very much energy.

None the less, these half-hearted missionary attempts represented the first modern experiments in formal schooling in South Africa and were the first conscious intervention in the sphere of language policy in a multilingual South African polity, more particularly in the very complex matter of medium of instruction. For reasons connected with the colonial-imperial rivalry between the states on the North Atlantic seaboard in Europe, the Company was determined to prevent Portuguese or Malayan Portuguese (the *lingua franca* of the East Indian archipelago) from becoming the, or even a prevalent language at the Cape. For this reason, Dutch was taught to the slaves and their children in the earliest schools. These schools, in brackets, were subjected to numerous and prolonged school boycotts! We see, therefore, that both linguistic chauvinism and resistance to it are rooted in the colonial origins of modern South Africa!

There is no need to delve into the complex and irrelevant issue of how Afrikaans arose.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say that by the end of the 17th century, most inhabitants of the Cape colony spoke as a *lingua franca* an early form of what came to be Afrikaans. For the children of some slaves, it was probably tending to become the home language. The 'miracle of Afrikaans', about which some Afrikaner nationalist writers waxed so lyrical, was the flower of the

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<sup>4</sup> Because of the racist preoccupations of the Afrikaner nationalist movement, this process has been exhaustively studied and documented usually in the direction of minimising the contribution of non-Dutch-speaking groups to the evolution of Afrikaans. For a good bibliography, see SESA, vol. 1, under 'Afrikaans', and Scholtz 1965. Recent publications from more progressively orientated scholars appear to be correcting the picture somewhat (see, for instance, Du Plessis and Du Plessis 1987).

lips of East Indian and African slaves as well as of European free burghers and indigenous Khoisan (i.e., African) people.

The subsequent struggles between 'English' and 'Dutch' in the wake of the second British occupation of the Cape (1806) are not very important for our present purposes. Again, because of the white-supremacist character of most research at South African universities, this particular conflict has been recorded and studied in depth. Afrikaner nationalist historians and linguists have described in detail how the *taalstryd* (language struggle) emerged after the Anglo-Boer War and how the two *taalbewegings* (language movements) culminated in the recognition of Afrikaans as one of the two official languages of the Union of South Africa in 1925.

Equally detailed are the studies of anglicisation policies pursued by British governors from the time of Sir John Cradock and Lord Charles Somerset at the beginning of the 19th century through to the jingoist policies of Sir Alfred Milner at the beginning of the 20th century. For our purposes, it suffices to establish the point that British imperialism wanted to ensure that the ruling elite as well as the new generations of colouists were indoctrinated by means of English literature and manners into a uniform loyalty to the British Crown. Just like the Dutch before them, who had tried to minimise the influence of Portuguese, they were intent on ensuring at worst a secondary role, at best no role at all for Dutch. I can do no better than to quote the summary of British policy on the language question as presented in the Oxford History of South Africa:

That the British authorities saw the importance of language is apparent from the steps periodically taken to compel the public use of English. They applied pressure first in the schools; they extended it by proclamation to the courts from the late 1820s onwards; in 1853 they made English the exclusive

language of Parliament; and by [1870] they appeared to be triumphing on all fronts. By the middle 1870s the Chief Justice, J.H. de Villiers, could tell an audience that although the time is still far distant when the inhabitants of this colony will speak and acknowledge one common mother-tongue, it would come at last, and when it does come, the language of Great Britain will also be the language of South Africa.

The upshot of British policy was that English became the language of public discourse among Whites while Afrikaans/ Dutch was pushed back into the private and religious spheres. That is to say, speaking generally, English was the language of the courts, central and local government offices, the schools, newspapers, etc., while Afrikaans and Dutch were spoken mainly in the home and in church respectively. The rise of Afrikaner nationalism and the struggles between Boer Briton in the wake of the mineral discoveries gradually led to an attitude of rejection towards English as a language among the colonists of Dutch descent.

## **The role of the missionaries**

Much more important in our present context than what happened in regard to English, Dutch and Afrikaans, are the policies that were followed by successive colonial governments vis-à-vis the Nguni and Sotho speech communities that were subjugated by Britain and the Voortrekkers in the course of the 19th century. In this connection, the role of the missionaries is decisive.

Whatever the differences between the many different missionary societies that operated in Southern Africa or between individual missionaries, all of them agreed with the strategic thrust of missionary work as understood by Dr. John Philip. He saw the Christianisation of the African

people as a means of 'scattering the seeds of civilization and extending British interests. British influence and the British Empire'. It brought to the 'savage tribes' a 'new confidence in the colonial government and the fostering of industry, trade and agriculture'. In the schools, which they established,, often against the resistance of the white colonists, the missionaries reared a tiny English-knowing black middle class and a working class that was trained to be 'a docile and efficient labour force which would accept European religious and political authority and social superiority'. For 150 years before the passing of the Bantu Education Act ( 1953), almost all schooling for African children was controlled by one or other denomination of the Christian Church. Their avowed aim was to assimilate their 'wards' into the 'Western Christian Civilisation' which they genuinely believed was superior to anything that Africans had ever produced.

From the point of view of the process of world history, most scholars are agreed today that the main task of the missionaries was that of colonising the mind of 'their' native wards. Whether they were conscious of doing so or not, all of them in one degree or another did just that. They represented, as it were, the ideological-cultural prong of a three-pronged strategy that also involved the administrator-soldier on the one hand and the trader-entrepreneur on the other hand. In 1851, for example, one of the missionaries is reported as having said:

It is something to have changed the old Kraal into a decent village – the old kaross into substantial European clothing – idleness into industry, ignorance into intelligence, selfishness into benevolence, and heathenism into Christianity.

Or, as P. Cook put it in an essay written in 1949, 'The missionary came to South Africa to preach the Gospel and to dispel the darkness of the heathen. But he taught elements of the same culture to which the trader, the



magistrate, and the farmer belong.’

In regard to language, missionary endeavour went in two directions. On the one hand, they spread the knowledge of English among African people throughout Southern Africa. The tiny group of black preachers and teachers (the ‘mission elite’) that they produced in the course of their labours was extremely competent and became what so many Afrikaner nationalists and, later, radical black activists despised so much, viz., ‘black Englishmen’! Inevitably, to quote Dunjwa-Blajberg, ‘the adoption of the English language meant the simultaneous adoption of English culture and in the final analysis accommodation to a new system’.

On the other hand, the need and desire to spread the gospel among the heathen made it necessary to reduce the indigenous languages to writing and to teach these written languages as widely as possible. Although literacy in the Nguni and Sotho languages became the possession of only a handful of African people, it has to be stressed that the missionaries became invaluable agents of colonial rule in that they helped to train a core of people who could spread the knowledge of the Bible among the colonised people and when necessary could act as interpreters in courts and in other government institutions. Again, it must be stressed that in most cases the missionaries were only or primarily concerned with evangelisation. But because of their position on the side of the ruling class, it was impossible to expect that they would do anything to undermine the system. Indeed, they inevitably facilitated the conquest, dispossession and subjugation of the indigenous people.

Missionaries throughout Southern Africa, often in conflict with white settlers and administrators, wrote down the indigenous languages, translated Bible passages and hymns into these languages and gradually began to write

them and to teach them in non-religious contexts.<sup>5</sup> As against this missionary practice, the British colonial regime, as I have indicated already, was concerned mainly, even exclusively in the early years, with the widest possible anglicisation of the colonised population, both white and black. While their anglicisation schemes were directed mainly at the colonists of Dutch extraction, they also promoted English as the medium of instruction for Africans, since the farmers and government needed a workforce that could read and write to a certain extent at least and that was wise to the ways of the modern world. They, like their French counterparts elsewhere in Africa, even if not as consistently, wanted to spread the language of the 'mother country' as widely as possible,

... in order to create a loyal and satisfied class of black helots who would accept the language and culture of the metropolitan centre as well as its hegemony.

Although some farmers often ill-treated their slaves and other black people, in practice their interests were served by a combination of the missionary and government policies. Most of them needed labourers who could communicate directly with them in English or in Afrikaans/Dutch. Very few of them would have been willing to consider giving their labourers' children any form of higher education. In the rural areas, many of them acquired a conversational knowledge of the indigenous languages.

In practice, therefore, the British colonial language policy was one of tolerating basic (primary-level) schooling in the relevant indigenous languages (i.e., for the small percentage of black children who actually went to school)

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<sup>5</sup> A good summary of the achievements of the missionaries in this regard during the first 80 years or so is that given in the *Oxford History of South Africa*. (See Thompson and Wilson 1978:73-74.)

and promoting English-medium instruction in a classically Anglocentric curriculum for the tiny mission elite. For the colonised people themselves, this meant that English language and English cultural traits acquired an economic and social value that was treasured above all else while their own languages and many of their cultural traits were devalued and often despised. A typical colonised mind or slave mentality became one of the most potent weapons of colonial policy, a programme built into the consciousness of black people (and of many whites) that ensured that the *status quo* was, by and large, accepted as good and just. All that one had to do was to climb up the socio-economic ladder which stood ready for every competent, abstinent and disciplined person to mount. If one had these attributes and was able to communicate in English, then – in the mythology of colour-blind individual rights – the sky was the limit!

This remained the essential policy in all the British colonies of Southern Africa. It also became the policy of the Union of South Africa, with some amendments, until the Afrikaner National Party came to power in 1948. After that date, a new language policy was put into practice, one which derived its essential features from the desire to maintain the labour-repressive, segregationist economy and society of the epoch before World War II. This system of racial capitalism was being undermined by economic developments that tended to downgrade 'race' as a yardstick for what kind of work one was allowed to do on the one hand, and by political developments arising from the rapid urbanisation of black workers and the consequent growth of black nationalist movements on the other.

## **Apartheid language policy and ethnic divisions**

Apartheid language policy tried to continue and to intensify British colonial policy but with the substitution of Afrikaans for English as the language of domination and social accommodation. Where this was not possible, Afrikaans had to be promoted on a basis of equality with English in all spheres and facets of life. We shall refer to this policy issue later. For the moment, it is significant that the Eiselen-Verwoerd policy on the language question was derived directly from missionary theory and practice as far as the indigenous languages were concerned. High-sounding rationalisations about the dignity of each and every human (i.e., 'ethnic') group and their right to promote their own language and culture, and all the philosophical trappings borrowed from the German Romantic movement of the late 18th century – especially from the philosophers Herder and Fichte – were used to explain this policy. But in fact, it was the possibility of breaking up the black people into a large number of conflicting and competing so-called ethnic groups that really gave rise to this policy. According to Thompson and Wilson,

The anti-assimilationist and anti-urban aim of the policy was quite explicit. The emphasis on vernacular instruction was to be the main instrument to promote separateness.

This language policy was, of course, part and parcel of a package of interrelated policies which reinforced one another. This is clearest, for example, in the policy of 'ethnic grouping' of African people in urban townships. According to the Verwoerd blueprint, 'Africans who speak different languages *must* live in separate quarters...'. The pre-modern backwardness out of which this nightmarish idea of a social order emerged is typified by the views of a Dr P. J. Meyer who, according to T. Reagan, among many other similar things, claimed that:

it is definitely certain that Godlessness is more prevalent among bilingual people than among monolinguals.

Using classical Central European social theory, the ideologues of Afrikaner nationalism proceeded to identify some 10 specific ethnic or national groups among the African people of South Africa as well as the (highly problematical) 'Coloured nation-to-be' and (eventually) the 'Indian' nation. What had begun among the missionaries as attempts to come to grips with the problem of reducing to writing the indigenous languages they were in contact with, was now used to define and confine groups of people in the prison of social anthropological theory. In other words, whereas the missionaries had inadvertently and unintentionally, helped to 'invent ethnicity', to use Ranger's apt phrase, by drawing usually arbitrary lines through language continuums because of the need, as they saw it, to demarcate their sectarian territorial boundaries, their work was now used to justify pernicious social, cultural and political practices, consciously geared towards the fragmentation and subjugation of the black people.

Harries has shown exactly how this process had worked in the case of those people who are now labelled 'Tsonga' in South Africa. His main theoretical assertion is that European (usually missionary)

experts in linguistics and ethnography classified the population of Africa into different groups. Defined by scientific enquiry, these ethnic groups became the basic unit of analysis of historians and other social scientists involved in African studies.

Consequently, 'linguistic and other boundaries were erected in order to restructure the African world in a way that would make it more comprehensible to Europeans'. He stresses, however, that the validity of this kind of categorisation is no longer accepted uncritically, especially by African scholars. Historians now know 'that many of the

ethnic divisions that are today a concrete reality did not exist, even in a conceptual form, before the end of the nineteenth century'. About the Tsonga themselves, he says categorically:

The point is that by the early 1880s Gwamba was not just the term used to describe a hypothetical linguistic group. It had become the name of a people conceptualized in the European mind, because of their perceived linguistic affiliation, as a 'tribe' or 'nation'. By imposing their European world view and logic on the confusing array of peoples surrounding them, the missionaries had created linguistic and political categories that were derived more from their own epistemology than from any local social reality.

Because of disagreements among the missionaries who 'laboured' among the African people in the Eastern Transvaal during the late 19th century, a debate was conducted about the number and relationship of languages spoken by these people. Harries concludes that:

... the division between Ronga and Gwamba was a product of the rivalry between the Spelonken and Coastal branches of the Swiss Mission and that their two linguistic representatives, Henry Berthoud and Henri Junod, represented the two poles of contemporary linguistic classification.

He points out that in 1911, ninety years after Berthoud had refuted (in vain) the existence of the Ronga as a discrete group, an American anthropologist wrote that:

the Ronga are a tribe because they have a delimited territory, a common language, common political structure, cultural unity; and an awareness of themselves as a distinct group.

I have chosen to cite this essay at some length because it lays to rest one of the most tenacious legacies of positivism in the social sciences, viz., the notion that social categories

are given once and for all. Thus in the more religious form of this positivist methodology, categories such as 'tribes', 'ethnic groups' and 'nations' are supposed to be god-given transhistorical entities which are, therefore, not really subject to fundamental change. Far from being god-given, Harries shows that in the case of the Tsonga, we are dealing (as he puts it, rather ironically) with 'a classic instance of ethnic differences whose roots may be traced to an obscure linguistic debate between two Swiss missionaries'.

Equally important is the fact that what Harries describes here was happening all over Southern Africa during the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. Besides exploding the ethnic and cultural mythology of racist ideologues, this kind of study has important implications for the determination of language policy and of related policies in the sphere of culture and education. When we come to deal with the question of the possible unification of Nguni and Sotho varieties respectively, this point will be discussed more concretely.

State language policies under the apartheid regime have at one level been no more than a continuation of the racist and sectarian in-group sentiments of the Voortrekkers who, in their 19th century republics, never tried to turn black people into Afrikaners and in so far as they did encourage or tolerate schooling for blacks, always promoted mother-tongue instruction. Inevitably, once the consistent application of apartheid ideology gave rise to ideas of 'separate freedoms', the implementation of mother-tongue instruction in *black* schools to as high a standard as possible was projected as an inalienable human right, one which the 'Afrikaner nation' itself had struggled for and attained finally in 1925. Van Wyk Louw, for instance, realised this and maintained that:

Once one acknowledges the value of national rights, not only as rights to which one's own group is entitled but as universal human rights, already one

has moved beyond the confines of just this or that particular group; and one will not then demand them for one's own group alone.

## **The impact of Soweto**

What Reagan calls the 'mother-tongue ideology' of Afrikaner nationalism has spawned a counter-ideology which, starting from the rejection of National-Party policies across the entire front of social issues, inevitably – given the language situation in South Africa today – has led to the situation where, in African schools, hardly any Afrikaans-medium and only some vernacular-medium instruction is imparted beyond Std. 5, more or less! The Soweto uprising of 1976, which brought to an ignominious end the Canute-like language-medium policies of the NP government in black schools, drew a line across the historical and political map of South Africa. This line also runs through actual and possible language policy and planning whether initiated by the state or by forces operating within civil society. The state, for example, is no longer able to impose the hallowed neo-colonialist requirement that both official languages have to be passed at matric level in order for certification to take place. According to Hartshorne, the use of Afrikaans as a medium:

... is limited to 1,46% of pupils in Std. 3 and upwards in schools of the Department of Education and Training and the national states and then not exclusively but alongside English.

Committed Afrikaner nationalists see this as a kind of *Ichabod* of official language policy. Steyn, for example, harking back to the *taalstryd*, predicts that 'an ever larger section of the South African labour force would thus receive their schooling in English', and he arrives at the pathetic conclusion that 'in order to remain white, the Afrikaner had to pay a price'!



What we see, therefore, is that in the sphere of language policy, as in almost all other spheres of life, the Afrikaner National Party regime, and white South Africa more generally, are in a state of crisis. The old certainties have disappeared and the scenarios that are being generated in the struggle against apartheid-capitalism are not acceptable to the ruling group. It is, therefore, fitting to conclude this section by referring to the views of Dr Karel Prinsloo, the Director of the HSRC Institute for Linguistic and Cultural Research whose work, in many ways, is representative of the trends in the thinking of the Establishment on these questions.

Reacting to the theses put forward on behalf of the National Language Project at the Silver Jubilee Conference of the English Academy of South Africa, Dr Prinsloo suggests that it might be necessary to recognise the nine different 'black' languages as official languages on a regional basis, with English and Afrikaans retaining their national official status. He also suggests that on purely statistical grounds, there is no reason to give preference to English rather than to Afrikaans in the function of *lingua franca*. After all, 48% of South Africans can understand Afrikaans, according to the 1980 census figures. Of course, as I shall argue later, the statistical position – assuming that the figures are somewhere near the real situation – is not the most important one in determining this kind of policy decision.

Be that as it may, there is a certain irony in the situation when a government and a section of the intelligentsia that have been so conscious of, and so preoccupied with, the language question for the best part of a century, arrive at Prinsloo's conclusion that:

South Africa is currently experiencing severe pressures for change in many spheres. In order to accommodate our linguistic diversity better and simultaneously to ensure a dynamic, broadminded

and realistic language dispensation in a changing country, an all-embracing language plan could be a useful guide for decision makers from different groups.

Or, even more significantly, when he admits that

... the Afrikaner as ruler of this country could earn a name for himself by devising a clever, broadminded and viable policy of multiculturalism in place of apartheid in South Africa.

Unfortunately for him, as I hope to show in the next section, the determination of the socio-cultural landscape of a post-apartheid South Africa, also in matters of language, will be undertaken by forces quite different from Dr Prinsloo's 'Afrikaner'. That particular breed, as defined by the patriarchs and ideologues of Afrikaner nationalism, has had its turn and has made a mess of our country!

## CHAPTER 3

### LANGUAGE POLICY AND RESISTANCE

By way of leading into the present debate on language policy in South Africa, let us look briefly at previous discussions and polemics on the question in the ranks of the resistance movement. Speaking generally, it is not surprising that the language question was never very far from the surface in all previous political strategising and reappraisal. Like the question of colour, the language question is one that confronts us in every sphere of life in South Africa. It is not a question that can be ignored or avoided under any circumstances. However, it is equally pertinent to record that, with two noteworthy exceptions in the fifties, the language question was never treated more than superficially in the ranks of the liberation movement. One of the main reasons for this was – to adapt a classic remark of the Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe – the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English' in our struggle. Without delving into the matter more deeply at this stage, it is clear that as long as middle-class interests and voices were paramount in the struggle for liberation, the main question was whether or not everything else should be sacrificed or ignored in order that the English language should become the national language of South Africa. Only in those circles and in those periods of our history where the interests of the workers and peasants were seen as paramount, was the question posed differently.

The black middle class, true to its missionary origins, plumped for English and adopted an elitist and patronising attitude to the languages of the people. In the struggle between Boer and Briton, they invariably chose the side of Queen Victoria. Let it be said immediately, that this

simplified way of posing the historic options with which this fragile class of people was faced should not detract from the fact that, in their consciousness, and given the constraints within which the choice had to be made, they chose what to them represented 'liberty' as against enslavement.

There are very many examples of the kind of attitude and policy I am referring to here. One of the most explicit comes from Dr Abdurahman, long-time leader of the African People's Organisation (APO). In a Presidential Address to the APO, which he delivered on 1 January 1912, some eighteen months after the 'Great Betrayal' of South Africa's 'non-white' people by British imperialism, i.e., after the establishment of the Union of South Africa as a British dominion, Abdurahman came out clearly for English as against Afrikaans. The view of the language question which he expressed on this occasion was typical of virtually the entire black intelligentsia. Few if any of them had given serious thought to the claims and rights of the African languages spoken in South Africa, beyond the issue of the medium of instruction in primary schools. Abdurahman addresses here some of the issues with which we are even now concerned:

The question naturally arises which is to be the national language. Shall it be the degraded forms of a literary language, a vulgar patois; or shall it be that language which Macaulay says is 'In force. in richness, in aptitude for all the highest purposes of the poet, the philosopher, and the orator inferior to the tongue of Greece alone?' Shall it be the language of the 'Kombuis' [kitchen] or the language of Tennyson? That is, shall it be the Taal [Afrikaans] or English?

The extent to which all 'politics', including the politics of language, was 'white politics' at the beginning of this century among all the articulate representatives of the tiny

black middle class becomes transparent in all Abdurahman's (or Jabavu's, or Rubusana's) speeches of this time. No wonder, moreover, that for the up-and-coming Afrikaner nationalists, all these gentlemen, the founding fathers of all anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, were no more than black Englishmen! In his speech, Abdurahman said:

Now this problem of language concerns our people and I think it should be the aim of all our members to seek to cultivate the English tongue wherever and whenever practicable or possible. Why so large a proportion of our people, who, to my knowledge, have facility in English fall into the habit of talking to one another in Cape Dutch, I cannot understand. Such a habit is not conducive to progressive thought and it should be discouraged. Remember that our South African nation must be composed of various races of different colours; and all the talk about racialism indulged in by the Europeans concerns only that spirit of deadly antagonism that exists between British and Dutch. Language is being used by one section as the means whereby that bitterness may be perpetuated and yet I have no hesitation in saying that even the most violent enthusiast for the Taal would admit the superiority of the English language; but the Dutchman ... is urged ... to cling to his language, and the motive behind it all is to accentuate the narrowness and the bitterness of a racial bias that moves the Boer so deeply.

## **The Congress Movement**

In spite of the rhetorical encouragement to cultivate the English language, very little was actually done outside the (mission) schools and the churches to spread the knowledge of English. The result was that only the thin layer of mission-educated, middle-class teachers, preachers, some

nurses and a few professionals gained proficiency. The working class continued to speak in their many different home languages. There was nothing comparable with the kind of systematic Afrikaans literacy campaigns undertaken by the Afrikaner nationalist movement, campaigns that intended to and did reach the lowest of the low as long as they were white. Only in the ranks of the Communist Party of South Africa and associated organisations was any conscious attempt made to spread English among black working-class people. Attempts were made by Edward Roux and other communists to use the night-school infrastructure set up by the Party in order to promote the learning of 'Easy English' and post-literacy reading circles among African workers in particular. Even though these attempts were confined largely to the Rand and to the Western Cape, they were important pioneering efforts and it is ironical that, in some respects, present-day language and literacy projects are having to reinvent the wheel.

It was out of these same Communist Party circles that – quite consistently – the first serious attention was given to the position of the indigenous African languages in an evolving South Africa. In regard to the relationship between language and national unity, the CPSA theoreticians and leaders, basing themselves on Stalin's theory of the national question but confronted with the complex socio-economic and socio-cultural realities of South Africa, for decades adopted an ambiguous position. In essence, they were proposing that the different language groups should, if objective forces permitted, be allowed to develop as they pleased while a larger more embracing national consciousness should be encouraged by, amongst other things, promoting a *lingua franca*. This is the way in which Moses Kotane, for example, formulated the issue of language and the national unification of the *African* people in 1931:

The language question would form one of the main difficulties. There is no one language which is sufficiently known and spoken by a majority of the people in Africa. Zulu is spoken mainly in Natal, Xhosa in the Eastern Cape; Sotho in Basutoland and in some parts of the Free State, Tswana in Bechuanaland, western and north-western Transvaal, as are Sepedi, Tshivenda and Shangaan in the eastern and northern Transvaal. Neither English nor Afrikaans is widely spoken among Africans. So, while in each republic or national area everything would be conducted in the language of its people, there still remains the problem of the official national language to be solved. Nevertheless, this could be settled by the common consent of all.

The voice of the future came from a most unlikely source, viz., the headmaster of Wilberforce Institute, Jacob Nhlapo, who was also a member of the ANC. In 1944, a pamphlet entitled 'Bantu Babel: Will the Bantu languages live?' was published under his name as number 4 in the series called *The Sixpenny Library*. In what one can only call a clairvoyant way, Nhlapo modestly but with the utmost clarity put forward in this pamphlet a large segment of the proposals that we have arrived at by a very different route. I shall discuss his main ideas in more detail later but for the moment, it needs to be stressed that he was one of the first South Africans to approach the question of language and national unity from a perspective that was not Anglocentric or elitist, while being in complete accord with the state-of-the-art in regard to linguistic science at the time. Essentially, Nhlapo proposed that the spoken varieties of Nguni and Sotho respectively be standardised in a written form as the first step to a possible standardised indigenous African language, in order to help to overcome tribal and ethnic divisions. While this process was being initiated and nurtured by all possible means, English should be promoted as the *lingua franca*. In his own words:

Which do you think is going to be easier to do; to get all African children to go to the school where they will all learn English; or to build out of the many Bantu languages in South Africa at least two mother tongues, Nguni and Sotho, and to get all the Africans to love and freely use them?

English ought to be made the African 'Esperanto' while the question of the African Babel of tongues is being cleared up. Even when we have been able to make Nguni and Sotho the two mother tongues – if ever we do manage to do this – English will still be the African 'Esperanto'. Even if we do not manage to build one joint Bantu language or two, English will still be the answer to the question of the many Bantu tongues as it has been in America, where nations from all parts of Europe and from Africa found themselves living together.

He returned to the subject in August 1953 in an article entitled 'The problem of many tongues' which was published in the ANC journal *Liberation*. As in 1944, his suggestions called forth a brisk response from various publicists and propagandists, most of whom had very different positions. I shall only refer to the most immediately relevant aspects here.<sup>6</sup>

In reply to Nhlapo's article, Peter Raboroko, one of the main activists of the Africanist tendency in the ANC at the time and one of the founders of the Pan-Africanist Congress in 1958, proposed instead the propagation of Swahili as the *lingua franca*, not only for South Africa but for the whole of Africa in the context of retaining for as long as necessary what he called the regional languages. An anonymous contribution to the Journal of the ANC Youth League (*Afrika*) published in early 1954 probably came from the same pen. In this article, the Africanist position on the

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<sup>6</sup> Interested readers should consult B. Hirson's very useful article for more detail.



language question in South Africa was summed up as follows:

In the Region the language used will be firstly, the regional language which might be Xhosa, Ganda, Sotho, etc. Then also will be the National Language – Swahili. These will be compulsory in school and state. Then the other languages such as English, Russian, French will be optional, but students will be encouraged to learn them for their cultural benefit. That will be the position with respect to language in the New Afrika. The slogans of Freedom! will be shouted in Swahili, in the Democratic Republic of New Afrika.

While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this kind of suggestion, it was clearly premature in the strongest sense of the term. Unless all the African states were independent and unless there was complete consensus on the economic reinforcement of such a language policy, it was a non-starter.

While such ideas have never died out completely in South Africa as well as in other parts of Africa, where the Pan-africanist ideal remains alive, none of the conditions for their realisation exists even today. As was stressed by the next contributor to the debate in the pages of *Liberation*, it was an essentially intellectualistic and romantic notion at the time Raboroko wrote about it. Alan Doyle, a member of the banned CPSA, accused both Raboroko and Nhlapo of idealism and elitism and in his contribution stressed the importance of the mother tongues of the different language groups. He opposed the language-planning exercises implicit in what Nhlapo and Raboroko proposed and insisted that each of the existing 'languages' (as defined by missionary literacy experts!) should be promoted and allowed to flourish. According to Hirson, Doyle's approach was strongly influenced by the writings of I.I. Potehin, a Soviet scholar of African Studies, who tried in the 'fifties to

analyse the societies of Southern Africa with the help of Stalin's theory of the nation, among other things.

The same approach was evident in the last contribution to this debate, an article by W.B. Lockwood entitled 'The future of the Bantu languages', published in *Liberation* in December 1955. Again, there was nothing intrinsically wrong with what Doyle and Lockwood were suggesting. However, both were slavishly following the Soviet model without due regard to the peculiarities of the total situation in Southern Africa. As a result, they unwittingly denied the power of language planning as an instrument of social policy and – paradoxically – contradicted the very concept and practice of social planning which lies at the heart of the Soviet model.

## **The Non-European Unity Movement**

One year after the debate in the ANC fizzled out, a similar debate exploded within the ranks of the other major national resistance movement of the 'forties and early 'fifties, viz.. the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM). The debate was similar in so far as it concerned fundamentally the problem of the relationship between English and the other languages spoken in South Africa. The fundamental source of the polemic, however, was not related directly to the class issues that inspired the debate in the Congress Movement. Instead, it was related to a political rift that had begun developing within the NEUM in which, amongst other things. one faction was bent on proving that the rival faction (located mainly inside the All African Convention) was succumbing to the seductions of black nationalism and Pan-africanism instead of sticking to the straight-and-narrow of the classical anti-liberal and anti-imperialist policy of the NEUM. The debate was sparked off by the consideration of the correct approach to the question of the medium of instruction in schools in opposition to the

tribalising policy then being implemented through Bantu Education.

In tune with their different styles of organisation and work, as well as the different constituencies in which the Congress and the Unity movements worked, the polemic conducted between V.E. Rylate (an obvious pseudonym) and A.C. Jordan in the pages of the *Educational Journal* of the Teachers' League of South Africa in the period 1956–1958 and in an independently published article by A.C. Jordan called *Still on the Language Question*, was characterised by all the trappings of academic scholarship. The down-to-earth, empiricist approach that was characteristic of the debate in the pages of *Liberation* contrasted with the flowery, often verbose and incurably Eurocentric discourse that was used in the *Educational Journal*. Be that as it may, the essential difference was between Rylate's position, which was based without acknowledgement on an early Stalinist (or Marxist)<sup>7</sup> idea of a world order in which a few major languages would become the main means of communication, and the (essentially Leninist) position of A.C. Jordan that all languages are equal as means of communication and as bearers of culture and, therefore, entitled to equal rights and state support in a democratic society. These basic points were smothered in verbose, personalised polemics of the worst sort. Since both were aware that they were in some sense representative of rival factions in the NEUM, the polemic was conducted along paramilitary lines, even though actual physical violence between the parties never broke out!

Rylate occasionally arrived at useful sociolinguistic generalisations. as when he asserts that:

... on the whole, the people's overwhelming and

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<sup>7</sup> Nikolai Jakowlevich Marr was Professor at Moscow State Institute for Foreign Languages during Stalin's reign.

decided preference for English as medium over Afrikaans and 'Bantu' ... is a reflection of their deep-felt need for a modern, highly cultured, nationally unified and democratic state as members of a modern world, and of the vast and hemmed-in and untapped human talents capable of building such a state on the basis of the natural resources and technological achievements and possibilities of the century.

He was, however, hampered by his obvious ignorance of linguistics and inevitably got stuck in the quicksands of mere rhetoric. Jordan, on the other hand, was well-versed in the study of language and, despite a certain old-world pedantry, on balance made the more relevant argument and practical policy suggestions. On the major issues involved, Jordan arrived at what I consider to be unassailable conclusions.

... In order to achieve their purpose, the rulers must exploit the universally accepted educational principle that the best way to impart knowledge is to use the pupil's own mother-tongue. As educationists, we cannot reject this principle. But as democrats we reject the idea of a 'Bantu community' or 'Coloured community', and if the given mother-tongue is in such a state that it cannot take the child beyond the confines of the supposed 'own community', then we must insist that while the child continues to receive training in the use of his own mother-tongue, he should as early as possible receive instruction through a language that will ensure him a place in a world community.

Such a world language, Jordan agreed like everyone else in the liberation movement, was English but, unlike Rylate, he insisted that 'we shall put English in its present unchallenged position but accept the eight other written languages and allow them to develop, if they can'. Moreover, as a student of language and society, he knew

that the situation could change dramatically. Hence, he made it clear that the struggle was not for any particular language but for the social benefits that derive from the promotion of particular languages at certain historical stages.

And if English should at any time be superseded by some other language, not as an 'official' language but as an undisputed medium of universal culture, we shall accord that language its rightful place and get the maximum cultural benefit out of it. Be it remembered always that the issue is not any particular language for its own sake, but *language as a medium of culture*.

## **The Black Consciousness Movement**

After the break-up of the NEUM in 1958–59, the language question did not feature prominently in the political writings of the liberation movement. The Soweto uprising in 1976 brought this question and many others sharply into the foreground of liberatory politics again.

Much that is of great interest to students of the language question in South Africa could be said about the Soweto uprising and its implications. For purposes of this essay, however, it is enough if we draw attention to a few important aspects that have a bearing on language policy.

The uprising was sparked off by the mass student (and worker) rejection of the neo-Milnerist policies of Verwoerd and his successors. By trying to force Afrikaans down the throats of black people, these worthies generated the same kind of response as had Lord Milner when he had tried to force English down the throats of their Afrikaans-speaking parents and grandparents. The futility of language and national oppression was seen clearly on the streets of all the major cities of South Africa during 1976–77 and beyond. Afrikaans became stigmatised as 'the language of the

oppressor', a label that is only now beginning to be shed with the rise of 'alternative Afrikaans'. I have already drawn attention (see Chapter 2) to the fact that the Soweto uprising simply erased the language-medium policy which had been implemented in DET schools until 1976. Today Afrikaans-medium instruction in schools for children classified 'Black' is the rare exception! For the first time, the working people, spurred on by their children, took the language question into their own hands and began solving it in accordance with their interests, as they understood them in 1976. The chilling slogan, *Kill Afrikaans!*, showed once and for all that the language question had to be taken very seriously.

The underlying educational, economic and political reasons for the students' uprising and for their parents' total support of their action, showed that the language question cannot be separated from the fundamental problem of social inequality, national oppression and democratic rights. Black students, generally, were placed at a disadvantage educationally because they came from economically and culturally deprived family and community backgrounds and because the imperialist and racist language policies followed by the NP government placed one more hurdle in their collective path. In the race for certificates and symbols, if they did not drop out with the 80% of their fellow-students who never got beyond Std. 6, they always arrived last at the winning post, very far behind their white compatriots. The latter, of course, ran in a race and on a course that were designed to bring out the best in them.

The uprising exposed not only the link between language medium policies and the generally low 'standards' of education for black children – more especially the vital issue of properly trained teachers – but also brought into focus the clear connections between education and economics in a racial capitalist South Africa. Since then,

only those who do not consider political questions deeply have found it possible to ignore the language question in our country. More particularly, the fact that both students and academics had at the time no carefully considered alternative language policy – at least not in their public utterances – has made it necessary that the spotlight be turned on this aspect of our struggle.

## CHAPTER 4

### A GLANCE AT ZIMBABWE AND NAMIBIA

A POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA/ AZANIA will without any doubt be strongly influenced by policies which have been adopted in neighbouring states. This will be especially important in areas where such policies have been successful in solving some of the more difficult problems of the society.

In almost all post-colonial African countries, similar problems in regard to the question of language policy were faced. Soon after coming to power in Uganda, former President Milton Obote had occasion to address the very question I am trying to open up for discussion here. He said, among other things:

The problem of culture ... is essentially a problem of how best we can maintain and develop the various cultural forms in Uganda through a common language. I have no answer to this. I am well aware that English cannot be the media (sic) to express Dingidingi songs. I have my doubts whether Lwo language can express in all its fineness Lusoga songs, and yet I consider that Uganda's policy to teach more and more English should be matched with the teaching of some other African language. We are trying to think about a possible answer to the question of why we need an African language as a national language? Do we need it merely for political purposes, for addressing public meetings, for talking in Councils? Do we need it as a language for the workers; to enable them to talk and argue their terms with their employers? Do we need an African language for intellectual purposes? Do we need such a language to cover every aspect of our



lives intellectually, politically, economically?

I would not attempt to answer that question but it appears to me that Uganda at least is faced with a difficult future on this matter and the future might confirm that a decision is necessary to push some languages deliberately and to discourage the use of some other languages also deliberately.

This rather lengthy quotation from a speech by one of Africa's least successful political leaders reveals the complexity of the language question as well as the grave responsibility that those people have who, for whatever reasons, formulate, promote and/or implement language policy.

Two of the countries of Southern Africa that have a similar colonial history and population make-up to our own are Zimbabwe and Namibia. It might be useful, therefore, to glance at the language policies adopted in or proposed for those states.

In the case of Zimbabwe, we are fortunate in that we are able to trace the story of how policy was determined from before independence. In a book that inspired this essay directly, Emmanuel Ngora analysed the language question in what was then Southern Rhodesia and put forward two policy options:

(a) That there be three languages in Zimbabwe: Shona, Ndebele and English. That Shona and Ndebele be called national languages and that both be accorded official status. That English be the language of international communication and the prime medium of higher education.

(b) That there be one national language in Zimbabwe, Shona, the majority language of the nation, the language of the Zimbabwe culture of the past, the language of the Mutapa emperors. That the national language be the main vehicle for the development of national culture. That English be an official language of international communication and the prime medium of higher education

for as long as the people of Zimbabwe find it necessary to use it.

Independent Zimbabwe in fact adopted a modified version of the first option. According to Heugh, immediately after independence, English was used as the medium of instruction at school while Shona and Ndebele were taught as subjects. After 1984, parents could choose to have their children taught in English, Shona or Ndebele for the first three years of schooling, after which English became the only medium of instruction. Gradually, similar provision was made for the teaching of minority languages such as Kalanga, Venda, Tonga and Shangaan. However, policy seemed to be quite fluid in this regard. English was considered to be the linking language, the language of national unity in spite of its colonialist origins. Heugh concludes from her brief study of the situation in Zimbabwe that:

what we have witnessed thus far in the early years after independence is a familiar pattern where English is selected as a language of wider communication and also one which acts as a unifying bond where intense rivalries exist between major groups within that newly independent state. ... [A]fter the initial language policy has been made, adjustments are gradually made to give greater emphasis to indigenous languages.

She agrees with the view of some educationalists in Zimbabwe that the trend of policy will be towards bilingualism. This movement toward bilingualism will, however, be in response

... not so much to the criticisms directed against English but more to the growing sense of pride in the indigenous languages as Zimbabweans experience a simultaneous growth in their sense of national unity and which allows them to feel less dependent upon their ex-colonial masters.

In Namibia, which has been called 'a nation in waiting', the language policies of the colonial government are identical with those applied in the 'mother country', South Africa. These do not concern us here. One year before independence, we have the good fortune of being able to refer to SWAPO's officially endorsed policy on the language question in an independent Namibia. This is a policy, moreover, which has to some extent been tested in practice, particularly in the SWAPO/Namibian refugee and guerrilla camps in Angola and Zambia. In the schools in these camps, according to Heugh,

The language of instruction right from the lower primary classes is English because it is the language of SWAPO. SWAPO has chosen English as its official language because it is a foreign and international language and as such may play a unifying role for Namibians whereas an indigenous language may create divisions within the society.

Long before actual independence, SWAPO has decided that English shall be the official language of Namibia. There is no doubt that its language policy has been strongly influenced by the policy of its major host country for many years, viz., Zambia. Heugh expects, however, that the typical pattern in most ex-colonial African states will be repeated in Namibia. So that, after an initial period during which pro-English policy will be promoted strongly, and as more economic resources and trained personnel (teachers, translators, interpreters, journalists, writers, etc.) become available, more and more emphasis will be given to the indigenous Namibian languages. Moreover, she stresses correctly that the present *lingua franca* status of Afrikaans in Namibia will be a serious obstacle to SWAPO's proposed policy especially as English is not widely spoken by black workers and peasants. In this connection, it is significant that the trade-union federation's newsletter, *The Namibian Worker*, in spite of the English name on the cover, is

published only in Afrikaans and in the Ovambo language(s) ! It is completely appropriate to quote at length the view of the Director of the United Nations Institute for Namibia (in Lusaka), Hage Geingob, to show how conscious the leadership are of the implications of their policy choice.

... In spite of the difficulties inherent in the task of implementing English as the official language for Namibia, the Namibian people will rise to the occasion.

This decision, however, does not imply that the indigenous languages are being dismissed. Local languages have a vital role to play in society and there will be a need for an overall multilingual language planning policy, both long-term and short-term, in which the various languages are institutionalized to their greatest advantage.

The aim of introducing English is to introduce an official language that will steer the people away from linguo-tribal affiliations and differences and create conditions conducive to national unity in the realm of language. Inherent in the adoption of this policy are a number of issues and implications ... Will English become an elitist language, thereby defeating the goals for which it was intended? Will Namibia be able to obtain a sufficient supply of teachers trained in English to teach English? How cost effective and cost beneficial will the choice of English prove to be for Namibia?...

## CHAPTER 5

# PROPOSALS TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC LANGUAGE POLICY FOR A POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA/AZANIA

SPECULATION ABOUT THE PERFECT SOCIETY after apartheid is as useless or useful as all other utopian writing has ever been. In the final analysis, only actual historical experience and power politics can provide the specific answers to the problems faced by policy makers, strategists and would-be social engineers such as language planners in given historical situations. This, at any rate, is the conclusion to which one comes after many years of pre-occupation with and research on the language question in a multilingual polity. In actual practice, a creative (or destructive) tension is set up between that which is objectively possible at a given historical moment on the one hand, and the relevant principles or 'givens' which are taken as their point of departure by policy makers on the other hand. Or, to put it more simply: policy makers do not have a free hand ever. They are constrained by tradition and by other objective (economic, political, geographical or demographic) factors. Their own perspectives are often determined by some of these factors.

### **Language, culture and nation**

Most independent political entities in the world today are multilingual to one degree or another. This is especially so on the continent of Africa where, for historical reasons, the capitalist mode of production was imposed on precapitalist societies with massive violence in a very short space of

time. As we have seen from the two African examples discussed in Chapter 4, the elites and ruling classes in newly-independent ex-colonial countries have always faced very serious policy decisions in regard to the question of national unification and these dilemmas have thus been evident in regard to language policy as well. For reasons discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this book, any post-apartheid regime will be faced with similar policy decisions.

By way of demonstrating that despite the passage of years and the possibility of learning from the experience of other people, we here in South Africa are faced with almost the identical dilemmas expressed by Obote more than twenty years ago (see Chapter 4), allow me to quote from a very recent interview with Mongane Wally Serote. The exiled poet had the following to say on the language question in South Africa:

The question of language is a very emotive issue which relates to the consciousness of the people. It's very important for people to be able to say what they want, not feel what they want is dictated to them or imposed on them. Yet while it is important for us to promote the different languages, we should also understand that the question of language has been used to divide people. In South Africa, people who come from the Northern Transvaal, the Vendas, when they come into Johannesburg they hide the fact that they are Vendas, they don't speak in Venda. People who come from the same area, the Tsonga, when they come into areas like Johannesburg, hide this fact. *We should find a way of promoting Venda and Tsonga so that people in those areas can speak in their language and express their condition of life. But I am suggesting that we also have to find a language that is international to everybody.*

Let us remind ourselves at this stage that we are concerned with the relationship between language policy

and national unity. It is very important, therefore, that we say very clearly where we stand in regard to the ongoing discussion among social scientists and other scholars about how we see such ideas as 'nation', 'culture' and 'language'. How are these three things related to one another? Is it true, for example, that a 'language group' is the same thing as a 'nation' or a 'cultural group'? Is it true that for people to be a 'nation' they all have to speak one and the same language? Is it true that every 'language' is the bearer of a unique 'culture'? Are these views, which are seen as common sense in most parts of the world, founded on indisputable facts?

It is certainly true that ever since the end of the 18th century, these and similar views have held sway in Europe, North America and most of their colonies. One language, one nation, one culture! This has been the slogan of almost all nationalist movements in Europe. This view, as I have said, became unquestioned dogma, the common-sense view that nobody even thought of questioning. But just as Copernicus and Galileo dared to pose the question: Is it not possible that the earth is revolving around the sun rather than the other way around as we have always believed and as the 'evidence' of our senses tells us?, so, today, a few daring scholars have thrown doubt on the Eurocentric dogmas about nations and nationalism. And just as people began to see and to explain things differently in the wake of the Copernican revolution, so, today, we are beginning to understand the processes by which nations come into being much better.

The most outstanding work in this regard was done without any doubt by Benedict Anderson. As I pointed out in Chapter 1 of this book, Anderson has shown us that the slogan One language, one nation is out of date for most parts of the world. However, it is equally important for us to understand that the idea that each language bears a particular, unique 'culture' is equally out of date. The

development of communications and the media is undermining all ideas of separate and separable cultures which are produced by relatively isolated communities. This is especially true of urban and metropolitan populations. But even in the remotest Asian and African villages the death of some character in some TV soap opera made in the USA is often mourned at the same time as every city slicker in every city in the world. In fact, in the words of Gordon Childe, 'cultures are becoming culture'. In such a world there can be no doubt that for a large and increasing segment of it, this common core of cultural experience can be transmitted and carried by means of any language. As with any experience, the connotations are different for every group of people located deeper in the concentric universe which is our world, until we reach the uniqueness of the experience of each individual at the centre. Where we draw the lines for defining 'a culture' is becoming more and more arbitrary as the communications revolution gathers momentum. South Africa, often described as a microcosm of the modern world, is a country where African, European and Asian cultural traditions have intersected for some three centuries and more and in which an emerging national culture is being carried and given expression to by means of many different languages.

### **Which way South Africa?**

In South Africa today, we have two basic options. we can either continue along the path of 'racial' and 'ethnic' inequality and separateness or we can choose to live in a non-racial, anti-ethnic and undivided Azania. From the time in the 1870s when diamond and gold mining revolutionised the backward rural economy of our country, it was always on the cards that a single nation would emerge, one that would be based solidly on the economic infrastructure built up by 'gold and maize' over the best



part of a century. Successive capitalist governments, however, promoted the policy of divide-and-rule because this suited their economic and political interests. One after the other, they invented and reinforced ethnic identities and racial consciousness among the people. The one shining exception from among all the white and black intellectuals and politicians who wrote on the subject was Olive Schreiner. She was one of a precious few people who at the end of the 19th century was able to dream of one united South African nation:

Wherever a Dutchman, an Englishman, a Jew and a native are super-imposed, there is that common South African condition through which no dividing line can be drawn ... South African unity is not the dream of a visionary; it is not even the forecast of genius, which makes clear and at hand that which only after ages can accomplish ... South African unity is a condition the practical necessity for which is daily and hourly forced upon us by the common needs of life: it is the one path open to us. For this unity all great men born in South Africa during the next century will be compelled directly or indirectly to labour; it is this unity which must precede the production of anything great and beautiful by our people as a whole. It is the attainment of this unity which constitutes the problem of South Africa: *How from our political states and our discordant races, can a great, a healthy, a united, an organized nation be formed?*

Instead of seeking to realise this vision of a future South Africa, the governments of South Africa did the exact opposite. They did everything in their power to keep separate the various social groups defined by colour, language, religion and class. Thousands of laws and regulations were dreamt up to enforce and to legitimise the racially discriminatory practices that are the stuff of the system of racial capitalism. Ethnic consciousness has, as a result of ruling-class policies, been deeply ingrained among

all segments of the South African population and it would be a serious error to underestimate the importance of this fact. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that if conditions should arise under which large numbers of the working people of our country should acquire vested economic and political interests in states based on ethnic definitions, separatist movements could become a reality in South Africa in spite of almost eighty years of anti-ethnic, anti-racist struggle for a unitary South Africa. At present, there is probably little danger of such conditions arising but it is as well to remind ourselves that few, if any, things are inevitable in history.

Economic and political developments since the mid-sixties have put high on the agenda the task of uniting the emerging nation in South Africa on the cultural and ideological levels where the bonding of the communities has been weakest. It has become essential that more and more of our people begin to see our present situation in historical terms. They have to begin to understand how economic and political forces are weaving together all the people of our country. These are the same kind of forces through which the nations of Europe came into being in the course of centuries. Today, in South Africa the same processes are happening under very different conditions. It is only when we have this historical perspective that it becomes possible to make decisions about such matters as language policy in such a way that these decisions will accord with the long-term interests of the majority of the people and will also be supported by most of the people. We have, in short, to see South Africa as a changing society, one in which all the old ideas and all the old ways of seeing our situation are being called into question. Events themselves – especially since 1916 – have begun to turn everything upside down and we must, therefore, begin to put forward new ideas and new ways of seeing so that our visions of the future can begin to be discerned in the apparent chaos of the present.

## **Towards a democratic language policy for a post-apartheid South Africa**

The Soweto uprising in 1976, as I showed in Chapter 3, brought the language question (as well as other important questions) sharply into the foreground of liberatory politics again. However, very little systematic work has been done to arrive at a liberatory strategy on the language question even though many *ad hoc* language projects have been started in response to economic and social pressures experienced on local, regional and national levels. It was only in 1985, with the establishment of the National Language Project (NLP), that we began to reconsider the language question against the broader background of our struggle for a free, democratic and united South Africa/Azania. In a pathfinding paper delivered at the October 1986 Conference of the South African Applied Linguistics Association (SAALA), Kathleen Heugh explored the explicit and implicit language policies of some of the more important tendencies in the liberation movement. In September of that same year, a short input paper was delivered on behalf of the NLP at the Silver Jubilee Conference of the English Academy of South Africa. In that paper the outline of an approach to the formulation of a democratic language policy for a socialist South Africa/Azania was presented. In it, we maintained that a democratically conceived language policy will necessarily bear features that accord with the cultural aspirations and political programmes of those working people who are the main agents of radical change in South Africa.

Our point of departure when we attempt to work towards such a policy must be that all the languages spoken by the people of our country have an equal right to exist and to flourish even though we know that limited material and human resources will not always make this easy. This position is not based on sentiment or on some ethnic

mystique but rather on the fact that no language is inherently superior or inferior to another. The fate of languages is decided in the course of class struggles in which the actual linguistic elements are seldom pertinent as such! We have to 'take a view' of the situation in Southern Africa, arrive at the most likely scenario for a post-apartheid South Africa in regard to the development and use of our languages and adopt a dynamic language policy that will take into account ongoing socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic changes.

It is clear, of course, that in developing proposals for a democratic language policy we see ourselves as being involved in a process of nation-building. In the emergent Azanian/South African nation, the interests of the majority, i.e., of the black workers, are and should be paramount and we should, therefore, base our language policies at all levels of our society on this fact. It is of great importance, however, that we take note of the warning which the American linguist, Herbert Kelman, wrote in an article in 1975:

...The deliberate use of language policies for purposes of creating a national identity and fostering sentimental attachment is usually not desirable. Rather, language policies ought to be designed to meet the needs and interests of all segments of the population effectively and equitably, thus fostering instrumental attachments out of which sentimental ones can emerge

... A sense of national identity is more likely to develop out of functional relationships within a society than out of deliberate attempts to promote it.

Our main goal in the sphere of language policy in the period up to a liberated, post-apartheid South Africa/Azania must be to facilitate communication between the different language groups that comprise the population of South Africa, in order to counteract the isolating effects of

Verwoerdian apartheid language policy. At the same time, this means that we have to encourage multilingualism among our people. At the very least, people ought to know their home language and English, but the ideal situation would be one in which every person in South Africa would be able to speak fluently his/her home language, English, and one or more of the other regionally important languages. In accepting this policy goal, we would in fact be doing precisely what most African and Asian nations have been doing for many years since their independence from colonial rule. Thus, for example, the United Nations Institute for Namibia's study on language policy in a free Namibia came to the conclusion that

... multilingual citizens able to switch between international and indigenous languages as contextually appropriate are becoming the rule rather than the exception.

### **Some specific proposals**

Subject to further consultation with legitimate and relevant organisations of the people, the most appropriate scenario appears to be one which assumes that English will be the *lingua franca* (in the sense of a universal second language) of a liberated Azania, regardless of the socio-economic system that will prevail. In accepting this, we are far from embracing what Chinua Achebe called 'the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'. On the contrary, our advocacy of English as the *lingua franca* has nothing in common with racist or purist Anglocentric notions of language policy. I shall refer presently to some of the problems, possibilities and implications of this suggestion.

We can also accept as a perfectly feasible projection the idea that after an initial phase of the dominance of English, one or other of the indigenous African languages, such as a

unified or standardised 'Nguni', for example, might well become the *lingua franca* of a free Azania/South Africa. Such a path of development would certainly be quite consistent with developments in many parts of the world, especially in Africa.

It is also necessary to stress that advocacy of English as the *lingua franca* for South Africa should not be confused with the recommendation that English become *a*, or even *the*, official language of a liberated Azania. Whereas SWAPO, as we saw in Chapter 4, has decided that English shall be the official language of an independent Namibia, I believe that we need much more research and discussion in South Africa before we can reach finality on this not unimportant question. What would appear to be a most likely scenario is one where English is universally accepted as *an* official language together with other languages, which would enjoy official status on a regional basis depending on the initial concentration of mother-tongue speakers of the respective languages. Another scenario is one which assumes that English, 'Nguni' and 'Sotho' are the official languages, with Afrikaans, Venda and other languages understood by relatively few people in certain parts of the country enjoying regional status. I must stress that these are speculative ideas that, hopefully, will set off debate and research in this area.

At the same time as we would promote the use of English as a linking language, we would encourage the learning by non-mother-tongue speakers of all the languages spoken by our people. Initially, at least, a conversational knowledge of the other regionally important languages should be spread widely. As political and economic developments in a free Azania will necessitate, more and more people will have to, and thus want to, get a sound knowledge of languages other than English. Today already, in territories such as the Transkei, knowledge of Xhosa is a recommendation for almost any job.

In sum, therefore, it may be accepted that if most people of South Africa have a sound knowledge of the *lingua franca* and a sound knowledge of one or more of the other languages other than their home language, communication between the different language groups will become less and less of a problem. Moreover, since it can be expected that economic, political and other cultural developments will reinforce integration and unification, this easier communication will in fact be midwife to a new (national) culture. In this, quite different, non-exclusivist sense, the words of Ngugi will begin to make sense in the South African context:

Language as communication and culture are ...  
products of each other. Communication creates  
culture: culture is a means of communication ...

Because of the dynamic conception of culture to which we subscribe, we assume further that at all preschools and primary schools a common core of cultural materials will be transmitted to our children, regardless of their home language. This 'core culture' will be constituted from all the currents that have flowed together to form South African society. Specifically, I refer to the African, the European and the Asian traditions together with those progressive elements in the universal 'Americanised' urban culture which no modern nation can escape. Such an approach will obviously facilitate communication between people coming from different language backgrounds and thus also the nation-building, unifying process. The core cultural elements which are being referred to here should not be understood as precluding or even discouraging regional and local emphases or other developments at the margins of our society, which are consonant with one or other language, religious or regional grouping. In other words, there is no intention to suggest some soulless social engineering; on the contrary, we are speaking about an

organic merging of what is desirable from the point of view of a post-capitalist Azania and what is possible in terms of the peculiarities of our history. The outcome ought to be an indefinable totality which is an authentic expression of the unity in our diversity. What we have to avoid at all costs is some dogmatic vision of a situation in which all possible developments will be agonisingly standardised and all our creativity will be transformed into a totalitarian nightmare.

### **Some implications of these proposals**

It is not my intention in this short essay to discuss the technical details concerning language teaching, language learning, translation, language courses, etc., all of which are essential aspects of any language policy and its implementation. However, a few remarks on certain aspects of these proposals are called for since some obvious questions requiring clear answers flow from them. The following remarks are offered, therefore, by way of stimulating debate and further research.

### **English as the linking language in South Africa**

In many ex-colonial countries in Africa and in Asia, the languages of the colonial overlords remained dominant in public life after political independence. English, French, Spanish and Portuguese were usually retained as one of the official languages of these independent states. Often, the relevant European language was proclaimed to be the only official language. However, in recent years, there has been a nationalist reaction to this general policy and more and more, local languages (such as Hindi in India and Swahili in Tanzania) are being promoted as linking languages.

Paradoxically, in South Africa, however, the position of English as a language of unification, and even of liberation, has grown in stature. Heugh has made the point that



...Whereas, elsewhere, a certain amount of resentment against the use of the ex-colonial language (English) has been expressed, the situation has taken an ironic twist in South Africa. The antagonism against the colonial language, English, has manifested itself within the ranks of the current (Afrikaner) rulers, certainly, but these rulers are not seen by the majority as representing their interests. Rather, the government is seen as a mutation of the colonial power. Consequently, the antagonism against English has, to a very large extent, been played down in black politics, and the opposition to the colonial language has been and is currently directed towards Afrikaans in black circles. The irony lies in the emergent attitude toward English as the vehicle for ideologies of freedom and independence.

This pro-English attitude has indeed been taken to extremes by individuals and organisations who suggest that English should be encouraged to the virtual exclusion of other languages. In other words, they propose a monolingual, English-only solution to the language question in a multilingual South Africa. By way of example, Professor Dirk Meerkotter, now at the University of the Western Cape, maintains that

... [t]he longer the struggle for a free, open and democratic South Africa continues, the more English will become so established as a lingua franca and unifying force in the next thirty to forty years that little will remain of the other languages.

There is, of course, no doubt that the use of English as a second language is spreading rapidly among black middle-class people. Among so-called Coloureds, especially, there is a marked language shift taking place out of Afrikaans into English so that whereas older middle-class Coloured people still speak Afrikaans to one another, they tend increasingly to rear their children in English. While English

is, therefore, without question the *lingua franca* of the middle class in South Africa, it does not by any means have this status for the entire population. According to the 1980 census, only 44%, of the population 'understood' English (as against 48% who 'understood' Afrikaans) (see Chapter 2). Of course, this situation is changing rapidly and even exponentially because of the fact that in the schools under the control of the DET and in the Bantustans, most instruction after Standard 3 is taking place in the English medium. This tendency has indeed brought us to the paradoxical situation, as Professor D. Young has pointed out, where a highly sectionalist Afrikaner nationalist state bureaucracy is willy-nilly presiding over the spread of English as the *lingua franca* of South Africa!

Recently, some of us have begun to question 'the unassailable position of English' both implicitly and explicitly. Thus, for example, Siphso Sepamla, in April 1988, ranged himself on the side of Ngugi's radical critique of independent, neocolonial Africa's language and cultural policies.

... Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been in the forefront in the fight for the use of African languages by writers on the continent. Until recently, I was one of those sceptical of this view. But then the black people in this country have always argued that English is a unifying language. We rarely looked at that statement closely. Somehow we never seemed to understand the dynamics of the struggle ...

But since trade unions added their muscle to the resurgence of resistance against apartheid the issue of English as the vehicle for freedom seems to have begun to decline. Ethnic languages, music, drama and dance have become unifying cultural elements. It is ironic that today we embrace our languages more than was the case twenty years ago. At the same time it is not surprising because at the time the Government wanted to ram down our throats

everything tribal. The trick then was to tell us to go back to our roots but we are choosing the route.

Others, such as Njabulo Ndebele, have posed the same kind of question in a more courteous manner, as it were. Indeed, Ndebele's position on this question in his important paper on 'The English language and social change in South Africa' (keynote address at the Silver Jubilee Conference of the English Academy of Southern Africa, 4-6 September 1986) is one that has to inform every discussion of this question.

... the role of English in South Africa is a matter the complexity of which goes far beyond the convenience and correctness of its use, for that very convenience, and that very correctness, are, in essence, problematic. The problem is that recourse to them is fraught with assumptions. Recourse to them begs fundamental historical, cultural and political questions on the assumption that everyone knows what issues are at stake. But, in fact, we cannot assume the validity of premises that have not themselves been scrutinized carefully. The latter tendency not to be critical about premises is pervasive in South Africa at the moment when all kinds of scenarios of the future are being drawn up in the hope that the oppressed will be dazzled by their brilliance.

However, despite this problematising of the idea of English as the linking language in South Africa, most progressive people accept that between now and liberation we have to promote precisely this solution in the context of encouraging the learning of the other more regionally defined languages spoken in the country. Of course, as the result of the massification of the struggle on the cultural front, the very definition of 'the English language' is being contested in terms of class and colour. Crudely put, 'We are using English but we've stopped to be embarrassed by our mistakes in English because we have decided to merge the

English taught with that which we have acquired through usage. A user aims at being intelligible regardless of the number of broken rules in the process' (Sepamla). In other words, the question: *who sets the standards?* has already been answered by the predominantly black intelligentsia. In the more diplomatic prose of Ndebele:

... South African English must be open to the possibility of its becoming a new language. This may happen not only at the level of vocabulary... but also with regard to grammatical adjustments that may result from the proximity of English to indigenous African languages.

The class leadership of the struggle for a free South Africa/Azania is, thus, crucial also for the solution of the language question. We have to understand that unless the vast majority of the South African population are organically motivated to learn and use English for the conduct of their affairs, English will become or remain, as in so many African and Asian countries, the language of the privileged neo-colonialist middle class. In India, according to the UNIN Study on Namibia,

... English, the language of colonial dominance, was allowed to continue as the link language. But this was fraught with dangerous socio-economic consequences. It perpetuated a small English-knowing elite, largely urban, who clamoured for a policy of keeping education, as one commentator put it, 'in a linguistic polythene bag'. In sharp contrast, 80% of the population living in rural areas continued to be a disadvantaged group further hampered by their ignorance of English ...

That this danger should not be underestimated in our particular situation is evident from the fact that already when Nhlapo was writing in the 'forties English had come to have:

... such a big place in African education, that it is

quite true that to most African scholars English is education, and education is English, and they find it very hard to believe that a person may know a lot and be very well educated. and yet know no English.

This attitude, in the words of Macedo and Freire written more than forty years later, leads to a middle-class 'pedagogy of exclusion that views the learning of English as education itself'.

### **The interim solution and some questions to ponder**

As I indicated before, Nhlapo anticipated our proposal for a democratic solution to the language question in 1944 (see Chapter 3). I have also indicated that this may be no more than an interim solution. In line with developments in other parts of the ex-colonial world, it is to be expected that the overwhelming majority of the people will put their imprint firmly on the features of a free Azania/South Africa. Since the majority of our people are mother-tongue speakers of one or other indigenous African language, it is more than likely that another *lingua franca* may eventually displace English in this function for internal purposes and that English will remain no more than a language of wider communication in an international sense.

Many questions and problems present themselves as the result of this approach to the language question. The question of 'Standard English', for example, is a vital one. Present policies in this regard definitely benefit mother-tongue speakers of English and/or Afrikaans-speakers. How are standards to be set? What kinds of English will be tolerated? Can and should the present Establishment organisations such as the English Academy play a role in resolving these questions? What are the most effective non-governmental ways of spreading the knowledge and the use of English throughout the population today? Should

such efforts be co-ordinated or should we have a totally *laissez-faire* policy? What are the possibilities of other languages spoken in South Africa becoming linking languages in the interim before the demise of apartheid? Is Meerkotter right in asserting that:

... it will be difficult to unite all the various language groupings in one of the Black vernaculars. And even if one accepts the fact that Zulu is a lingua franca for Blacks in South Africa it can never be a lingua franca for all as the number of Whites, Indians and 'Coloureds' who can speak or understand Zulu is insignificant. Zulu can therefore hardly become a unifying force in the country.

Or, is Prinsloo's suggestion that Afrikaans can play a unifying role worthy of consideration? Does the emergence of 'alternative Afrikaans' in the Western Cape alter the linking potential of this language?

These, and many more, are some of the questions that need to be researched now, questions for which we need to find answers in practice since the unifying role of communication by means of language will become increasingly important in South Africa during the next ten years or so.

### **Language planning**

Many people believe that one should not 'tamper' with language; they say it is best to 'leave your language alone'! However, in these days when almost nothing happens in modern industrial societies without some degree of planning, such views are simply outdated or at best quaint. When economic planning, town planning and even family planning are accepted by the majority of people in the world today as being necessary for a healthy and secure existence, there ought to be no objection in principle to language planning. The only proviso must be that such planning will at all times occur with the full participation

and consent of all the people involved. Any plan that is imposed will be rejected (as in the case of Bantu Education and Afrikaans-medium instruction in recent years) or it will be subverted and made unworkable by the people concerned.

Put as simply as possible, language planning means a deliberate and systematic attempt to change a language itself or to change the function of a language in a particular society. In most modern states, language planning is undertaken by the state and its agencies. Indeed, we all know that this is exactly what the Afrikaner nationalists have done in our country since 1948. The importance of Afrikaans was systematically enhanced and that of English equally systematically reduced. The indigenous African languages were deliberately altered in various ways *via* the schools and the public media (radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, etc) in order to make them carry specific ethnic content, i.e., in order to make them more effective instruments of division. For reasons which we need not go into here, many aspects of this master plan failed even though other aspects (such as the downgrading of English) 'succeeded' all too well !

What is of more importance for us is the bold aim which we have of undertaking 'planning from below', i.e., from within the perspectives of the liberation struggle which we are waging for our democratic rights and for the unification of our people. On some of the proposals put forward in this essay, there is already general agreement in the movement. Almost all of us accept, for example, that English should be promoted as the linking language in the short term and more and more people are beginning to understand the urgency of learning the other languages spoken in South Africa. People have different opinions on the best ways of doing these things as is shown by the many different language projects in our country. But this is as it should be. Let a hundred flowers bloom!

Not everyone is in agreement on some of the more radical suggestions made in this essay. In particular, the implied downgrading of Afrikaans will (and does) generate much criticism from Afrikaans-speaking whites especially. It is part and parcel of the political task of the liberation struggle to persuade these people that the solution suggested here is indeed the correct one, that which will give to Afrikaans speakers the maximum of security in a free Azania/South Africa.

More problematical are our suggestions of a Standardised Nguni and a Standardised Sotho. Already in the 'forties and 'fifties when Nhlapo made the same suggestions, he was 'shot down' and ridiculed by many people. Now, at the end of the 'eighties, similar responses are forthcoming from academic and political circles. (Those who are interested in some of the details can read up the beginnings of this debate in Appendix 2.) I believe that it could be extremely important for future peace and progress in South Africa that we promote this debate with all vigour today.

Perhaps I should stress – though it ought to be unnecessary – that the development of a written Standard Nguni and a Standard Sotho, as an initial phase of a very long-term process of 'uniformation', need not and will not lead to the disappearance of Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Siswati, Sipedi and Tswana and their dialects. The situation would be similar to that which obtains in Germany between Standard German and the various dialects of German. Indeed, subject to the availability of resources, they will be encouraged in print in literature of all kinds. The main difference will be that in all formal situations, including the crucial area of education, the Standard Nguni or Standard Sotho forms will be promoted. It is to be expected that, over time, the spoken standard – used in formal and relatively formal situations – will begin to approximate to the written standard even though individuals will inevitably betray



their regional or social origins *via* their accent and intonation as they do in all similar situations elsewhere in the world!

It is perhaps appropriate to quote Ngara by way of indicating just how difficult and slow the process will be if it ever begins. Referring to Zimbabwe, he says:

Shona has been unified and standardized but no real attempt has been made to develop the language into a vehicle of education and technical development. People still use their regional dialects, and some intellectuals may have objections to aspects of present-day Standard Shona which was, after all, imposed on them by White authorities, but there is no doubt that the standard language is now a reality. It is the officially recognised language with a standardized orthography which has been revised a couple of times ...

This particular proposal (about Standardised Nguni and Sotho languages) is undoubtedly the most radical of the group of proposals that we are putting forward. It will require much learned research and debate but in the end it will be condemned or accepted by the people who speak the different varieties of 'Nguni' and 'Sotho'.

In regard to official languages, I would propose that English be an official language nationally and that all other languages have official status on a regional basis. This will be decided by the concentration of mother-tongue speakers of the particular language(s). In most of the Cape Province, for example, English, Afrikaans and Nguni (or Xhosa) would be the official languages whereas in the Orange Free State, it would be English, Sotho (or Southern Sotho) and Afrikaans; in most of Natal, it could be English and Nguni (or Zulu), and so forth. All of these are, clearly, no more than suggestions at this stage.

### **Medium of instruction**

A few remarks on the question of the medium of instruction in state schools have to be made. Formal education in state-controlled or state-aided schools is the most powerful means by which social planning takes place in the modern world. In this regard, the modern school is even more powerful than the Christian Church was in Europe during the Middle Ages. This is one of the main reasons why such intense struggles have been waged in South African schools in recent years between those who want to maintain the status quo and those who want to bring about a radical change in society.

The language(s) used to teach particular (or all) subjects become the most important language(s) in the modern state. Usually, those languages that are important for driving forward the economy and those that are deemed to be important for religious or cultural reasons are the ones that are preferred by parents. For many reasons, in South Africa – as in most ex-colonial countries – the indigenous languages of the African people do not have enough literature and lack an adequate technical vocabulary for the teaching of most natural science and mathematical subjects above certain standards. On the other hand, it is generally accepted that children learn best in their mother-tongue especially in the very first years at school, when the move from home to school can often be made easier through the use of the child's home language in the classroom.

For this reason, most educationalists believe that we should have mother-tongue instruction in the first four/five years at school, with English being introduced as a subject in the second year. English should then gradually be introduced as the medium of instruction in most subjects, with the mother-tongue being taught as a subject. I would add only that it is my view that as and when adequate educational materials in and trained teachers for the

indigenous languages become available, the relationship or balance between the indigenous languages and English should and probably will change.

For the rest, it is essential to stress that this question is one of the most difficult and complex in the sphere of education. There are actually no easy answers. Much depends on what has gone before. Unfortunately, in South Africa the legacy of apartheid and Bantu education is a very negative one. Consequently, much exploratory work has to be done. All that can be said with some certainty is that we have to begin *today* to produce a generation of highly skilled, well-trained language teachers. In particular, we need to insist on a few specialist English teachers being employed in every primary school in South Africa. This would immediately raise the standard of English understanding and usage among all our children and would do away with the need for 'remedial' and 'compensatory' education at the higher levels. The socio-political implications of these and many other relevant proposals that are suggested by our approach require much research and discussion. We believe that it is urgent that this process begin immediately.

## **Conclusion**

The proposals put forward here are meant to get our people to discuss the importance of the language question. They have been thought through very carefully but I know very well that no person or group of people can see the whole of reality. I have no doubt, therefore, that many important and novel ideas will come out of the debate which I hope this essay will give rise to. It is also clear that there are right now many ideas and experiments of which I am not even aware. For me, the most important result of the reading of this essay by any person would be that (s)he felt the urge to get involved in the discussion of the importance of

language as an instrument of unification. If, beyond that, the reader would be motivated to act along the lines suggested here at whatever level (s)he can get involved, the effort will have been more than worthwhile.

## APPENDIX 1

# ABOUT THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE PROJECT

### NLP rationale

Historically, language in South Africa has been deployed by government as an agency of control. The present government has used language policy and language planning devices in the implementation of the apartheid system. In looking toward the future, then, it should not be surprising that educationalists, and, in particular, language specialists, should concern themselves with new directions in language policy and planning procedures.

Underpinning the rationale of the NLP is the conviction that a new language policy, which reverses the effects of the present one, needs to be developed. More precisely, it is held that language is a powerful tool which may be used as a unifying device rather than as a vehicle for division.

### NLP policy

It is more than likely that English is going to play a pivotal role in the shaping of a new South Africa/Azania since it provides us with a convenient *lingua franca*/linking language through which the concepts of a new unified society may be transmitted.

While it is the policy of the NLP to promote the notion of English as a *lingua franca*/linking language, it is also the policy of the NLP to promote all the languages of South Africa. People need to be able to communicate with one another through the languages spoken in the region in which they live. So, for example, if one lives in Natal, one needs to communicate through English and Zulu. If one

lives in the Western Cape, however, one needs to converse through the media of Afrikaans, English and Xhosa. Consequently, we believe that the groundwork for providing useful language courses and tutor-training programmes; which are specifically geared toward a directly communicative approach should be undertaken without delay. Furthermore, we also believe that since we are working toward the democratisation of language, the variety of language taught (i.e., standard or dialect) should depend upon the wishes/needs of those concerned. The NLP does not advocate the spread of elitist varieties of language. The fundamental aim is effective communication.

### **The position of English as *lingua franca*/linking language**

An assessment of the language policies of other African countries suggests that English will be the official language chosen to function as a *lingua franca* in the future (certainly during the period immediately after a change in the power structure ).

Research conducted reveals that there is widespread support of the choice of English as a *lingua franca* in this country.

The choice of English to fulfil this role is likely to foster unity and avoid the possibility of division that the choice of another South African language might present at this stage.

English facilitates communication not only with neighbouring countries but within the wider context of international discourse.

Financial considerations make this language the most feasible medium of instruction after the initial years of primary education.

## **The position of the other languages**

Most educationalists argue that it is important for the child to receive early tuition through the medium of the mother tongue, and the NLP supports this position.

The other languages will always be important vehicles of communication in the regions where they are the mother tongues of large numbers of people.

Evidence of the position of the indigenous languages in other African countries reveals that after the initial period of independence and a reliance upon the language of the ex-colonial power, greater significance is attached to the former. Writers, for example, have shifted from writing through the medium of the colonial language to the medium of their own mother tongues. The NLP regards this movement as significant and anticipates greater importance being attached to the other languages of South Africa in the future.

## **NLP work in progress**

The NLP is engaged in research into language projects which are being conducted or implemented by community and other non-government organisations. At present, there are many such organisations which struggle to find adequate teaching resources, suitable methodologies or approaches for their learners, and solutions to ongoing problems.

The NLP hopes to facilitate cooperation among these groups in order to rationalise resources and the training of personnel. This is seen as part of a long-term campaign which will be flexible enough to embrace every bona-fide project of the oppressed people, regardless of the political tendency, if any, from which it takes its inspiration.

The LANGUAGE PROJECTS' REVIEW is a quarterly publication of the NLP which provides a platform for

discussion and debate among groups involved in language programmes, whether at a literacy, second language or conversational level. The review is intended to provide a functional service to language organisations by giving profiles of relevant language programmes, and contributing to discussion about methodology, language planning and language policy. We hope that through this newsletter more groups will be able to share information and participate in a wide range of matters concerning the development of language education in this country. A further function of this newsletter is to review newly published material which is relevant to learners and teachers. It is editorial policy to use, as far as possible, a non-academic style of language in the material published in the review in order that the articles be accessible to as many people as possible.

In terms of COURSE DEVELOPMENT and TUTOR-(COORDINATOR-) TRAINING PROGRAMMES, the NLP is actively engaged in the process of working at a communicative approach to language teaching and learning. Care is taken to ensure that the learning process takes place through a participant-centred environment.

Most of the language work undertaken by the project has thus far been in the area of Xhosa conversation, although, during 1988 we began English Second Language course development with cooperatives and trade unions.

The Xhosa conversation courses have been run with groups of participants from various youth and community organisations as well as a few trade unions. Besides the courses run for organised groups, an increasing number of individuals has been approaching the project for Xhosa conversation classes.

Resource production complements the development of courses and comprises guidelines for lesson-planning and course-development, cassette-tapes of song and dialogue, wall-charts and flash/cue-cards. The language presented in the courses and resource materials reflects non-sexist, non-



racist and non-ethnic values.

An aim behind the labour-related ESL courses for cooperatives and trade unions has been to develop a process whereby the participants are involved in producing their own resources in terms of creating sketches/mini-plays and booklets.

During 1989 ongoing work of the project as outlined above will be expanded and extended. A children's conversation course in Xhosa will be developed and we hope to be able to begin work in rather specialised areas of Xhosa conversation in order to meet the needs of groups working in the area of health and education in Xhosa-speaking communities.

Further development of labour-related ESL courses with unions is anticipated by the project. We hope also to participate in an in-service training course for pre-school teachers who need to upgrade their skills in English.

In response to a number of requests from the community we are beginning to work in a new area for the project viz. Afrikaans literacy. Two coordinators will be working in this area during the year.

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## APPENDIX 2

### STANDARDISED NGUNI AND SOTHO?

From: Letters to the Editor

LANGUAGE PROJECTS REVIEW 3.1, April 1988

I am at present engaged in research which I hope will eventuate in a series of concrete proposals for a democratic solution of the language question in South Africa.

This is a complex domain which involves a number of interrelated major problem areas. I shall not, for the present, specify these any further. In later editions of your journal and in other relevant forums, I hope to report on the progress of my research.

However, one issue has engaged my attention and will not be postponed. I refer to what I call the question of the possibility and desirability of consolidating (standardising) Nguni and Sotho respectively. In a nutshell, I am examining and airing the possibility that the major varieties of Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, Ndebele) and of Sotho (Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, Tswana) can and should be standardised or unified in writing and in all formal settings (school, church, law-courts, etc.).

I wonder whether any of your readers would be willing to comment on this question. In my view, what is needed, if this is a feasible idea, is the initiation of a process similar to that which took place with Shona (originally under the impetus of C M Doke) in the colony of Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s. Allow me to quote from what is probably the most authoritative recent work on the language question in Zimbabwe, i.e. E.A. Ngara's *Bilingualism, Language Contact and Planning. Proposals for Language Use and Language*

*Teaching in Zimbabwe* (Mambo Press, Gweru 1992):

The use of the word Shona to refer to this Bantu group is ... a very recent development, going back to the end of the nineteenth century ... [O]rdinary Shona people in the country tend to classify themselves according to the names given to regional groupings such as the Karanga, the Manyika and the Zezuru. Doke ... was responsible for recommending the use of the term Shona to designate the unified language which was the result of his survey. But it should be mentioned that Doke, whose status was that of adviser to the Government of the time, was not the first person to point out the need for unifying the various dialects that were collectively called Shona. Various individuals and missionary institutions were already working hard on this, and particular mention may be made of the Southern Rhodesia Missionary Conference which first met in 1905 and was in fact the body which recommended to the government that an expert be approached to advise on the question of unifying the Shona dialects ... Since Doke's recommendations, Shona has been used in all official documents and by linguists and academicians. Educated Shona speakers tend to call themselves by this name. (p. 16)

If the situations are indeed comparable, the question I am posing is whether, like Ngora's 'individuals and missionary institutions', we should not be hard at work promoting the unification of the Nguni dialects and the Sotho dialects respectively, since it is to be assumed that the present government of the RSA is unlikely to put any resources behind any such project. The economic, political and socio-cultural sources and implications of my suggestion ought to be immediately obvious to most people who have thought about the language question in relation to the problem of national unification and national liberation in our country.

NEVILLE ALEXANDER, School of Education, UCT

From: Letters to the Editor

LANGUAGE PROJECTS REVIEW 3.2, July 1988

As a language teacher and a student of sociolinguistics. I read with interest the letter written to you by Neville Alexander on the question of how language is implicated in national unification. He has correctly noted that 'this is a complex domain which involves a number of interrelated major problems'. I would like to comment briefly on some of the points he has raised with regard to the possibility of unifying or standardising: Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele into one Nguni language; and Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho and Tswana into one Sotho language. To illustrate the feasibility of this process, he cited the case of Shona in Zimbabwe. Firstly, I do not believe that the situation of the 1930s mentioned in Neville's letter is comparable to the South African situation. C.M. Doke and company were dealing with varieties within one language, even though there may not have been a blanket term for these dialects at that time. It would be comparable to, say, Xhosa with its dialects such as siXesibe, siMpondo, siHlubi, siMfengu, etc. Although the missionary schools and then the government adopted amaNgqika as the standard variety of Xhosa, it would have been possible to unify all the Xhosa dialects in the same way as was done with the Shona dialects, Karanga, Manyika and Zezuru in Zimbabwe.

In the South African situation presented by Neville, one would be dealing with different languages rather than dialects, even though some of these languages would be from the same group and are therefore mutually intelligible. I do not wish to say that Neville's suggestion of standardising Nguni and Sotho would be a futile exercise. If it were possible, in fact, it would be an ideal option. But what are the other alternatives? Before we attempt to look at possible answers to this question, it may be necessary to comment on what the possible problems would be with the practical

implementation of Neville's suggestion. In my opinion there are two potential hurdles which would stand in the way of its implementation. These are: 1. Language and identity: 2. Language status. It is common knowledge that language is not only a symbol of group identity, but also a weapon used to protect this identity. Given this fact, and the fact that apartheid has done so much to influence ethnic group mentality amongst the black 'races' in South Africa, one wonders how much it would take to make people see the need for re-adjusting their language loyalties and warm to the concept of a new standardised Nguni or Sotho.

Black languages' status has been so undermined by the South African language policy that even their speakers are painfully aware of the impotence of these languages in providing access to job market opportunities. Attempts to standardise Nguni or Sotho would have to be coupled with a comprehensive programme of non-linguistic projects that are geared to change the status of the black languages. This is not an impossible task, but it is one that would take time.

Space in your bulletin will not allow me to develop these points further. However, I should conclude that as a short-term objective, our energy should be devoted to attempts to make it possible for speakers of one language group to acquire proficiency in the other. As a first step towards achieving this, Nguni parents should demand that their children be taught one Sotho language and Sotho parents that their children be taught one Nguni language. This would facilitate inter-group communication.

With regard to the question of a national language, I still stand by my view expressed in one of your earlier newsletters (quoting a letter to the *Cape Times*) that South African English should be adopted as the national language, but with the others accorded the same status and even that of joint official languages at regional level.

SYDNEY ZOTWANA, UCT

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