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The impact of the hegemony of English on access to and quality of education

with special reference to South Africa

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Introductory remarks

To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies in the African context that deal directly with the relationship between language-medium policy and practice in education and poverty. At best, we have general reports on the relationship between failure rates, drop-out rates or/and repeater rates and the language-medium issue. The fundamental reason for this lacuna is, of course, the difficulty of isolating or, at least, weighting, language medium as a factor or a variable in the educational performance of individual learners. In this essay, I approach this matter in a preliminary manner with specific reference to work in progress in South Africa by educationists, economists and statisticians. It should, therefore, be taken as the beginning of a larger research programme that will unfold in the course of the next few years. This task is particularly pertinent because of the diverse poverty eradication and poverty alleviation - the contrast is significant in socio-political terms - initiatives that are currently being punted in South Africa by both government and non-government institutions. Further afield, the international rhetoric around the *Make Poverty History* campaign compels all scholars to examine their particular disciplines in terms of the ways in which their practices and their theoretical *a priori* either exacerbate or alleviate poverty in the world or in their relevant spaces.

In order to make the analysis and understanding of the South African dynamic as precise as possible, I spend considerable time on the big picture, beginning with our views about the global relation of forces as manifest in the global, regional and national linguistic hierarchies that have evolved over time. In this context, the kind of caveat that Mufwene (2002:191) issues when he reminds us that as language planners, we have to take into account the ecologies that make it possible for languages to thrive in their given state. For, as he puts it, if we are going to get the speakers of affected (endangered) languages to change their behaviour,

… we must convince them of the benefits that humanity, especially the affected populations, can derive by changing their behaviours. As both languages and cultures are dynamic and constantly (re)shaping themselves through the behaviours of the populations with which they are associated, bemoaning ancestral traditions alone will not do the job.

Researching the historical background

Whatever the point of departure and philosophical assumptions of the numerous studies on colonial language policy and practice in Africa under British rule, there is complete agreement on the fact that in all of the affected territories, proficiency in the English language came to be seen by would-be men and women of substance as the most important key to social, economic and political success. Along this trajectory, it is on the issue of the hegemony of English as a global language that we ought to do many more in-depth studies of individual countries. Of particular significance would be analyses that enhance our understanding of which African individuals and which social conditions were decisive in establishing not the dominance but the hegemony of English. It would be important to identify the historical moment when there was what the Afrikaans poet and writer, N.P. Van Wyk Louw, called "a balance of arguments" such that the alternative choice(s) made by these decisive individuals (or groups of individuals) would have initiated a totally different social and historical path of development. How, to give a practical example, did the situation arise where a black South African medical doctor could say, at the turn of the 19th century:

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, NA] or the language of Tennyson? That is, shall it be the Taal [Afrikaans, NA] or English? ... (Cited in Alexander 1989:29)

As a significant footnote to the history of Africa, it should be recorded that in the Union of South Africa, it was eventually decided by the representatives of the white minority to have both English and Afrikaans (until 1925, Dutch) as the official, i.e. "national", languages.

A second area for research on the historical background to the current linguistic landscape on the continent of Africa concerns the contradiction between articulated language policy understandings and the de facto policies of the leadership cadres of the nationalist and/or avowedly socialist movements of national liberation and political independence in the period between 1945 and 1975, more or less, when most of the continent was rid of formal rule by its colonial overlords. Works by Laitin, among others, have dealt with some of the issues involved in a generalised form but, as important and useful as these are, we still need detailed studies of individual countries. Such studies are important in terms of determining the potential of language planning for the initiation and consolidation of counter-hegemonic strategies for the establishment or, in some instances, the re-establishment of African languages in "the controlling domains of language". This, in turn, is an essential condition of the success of the core projects of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), to which I shall return at the end of this essay.

Post- and neo-colonial language policies in Africa have, quite naturally, received much more attention from scholars. However, with a few notable exceptions, very little work has been done in terms of paradigms such as world-systems theory or of the social reproduction approach of Pierre Bourdieu, in which the economic, including the class, aspects of specific language policies become manifest and explicable. For each of the

African (or other) countries concerned, it would be of inestimable value if we could demonstrate how the situation came about and was perpetuated where, in the original formulation of Pierre Alexandre:

… (on) the one hand is the majority of the population, often compartmentalized by linguistic borders which do not correspond to political frontiers; this majority uses only African tools of linguistic communication and must, consequently, irrespective of its actual participation in the economic sectors of the modern world, have recourse to the mediation of the minority to communicate with this modern world. This minority, although socially and ethnically as heterogeneous as the majority, is separated from the latter by that monopoly which gives it its class specificity: the use of a means of universal communication, French or English, whose acquisition represents truly a form of capital accumulation. But this is a very special kind of capital, since it is an instrument of communication and not one of production. It is nevertheless this instrument, and generally this instrument alone, which makes possible the organization of the entire modern sector of production and distribution of goods (Alexandre1972:86).

A note on the political economy of language in contemporary Africa

Any consideration of the impact of language policy on access to and quality of education in modern Africa, as elsewhere, has to begin by posing a few critical questions about the relationship between language policy, language use and economic and political power. Given the structure of the linguistic markets inherited by the African ruling strata from the colonial era, how do language policies or, more pertinently, de facto language policies, tend to reinforce or to counter the all-too-evident social inequalities of the post-colonial system? The character of the post-colonial state is, naturally, the key to finding the appropriate answers to this question, in spite of the fact that most analyses of these peripheral *neo*-colonial states never even mention, much less discuss, the language issue.

Difficult though it might be, it is essential that students of the political sociology of language attempt to establish the causal connection between the objective imperatives of administering polities where, on the one hand, there had been little or no disruption of socio-economic patterns of interaction or of the transactions and relations of daily life for the vast majority of the population and, on the other hand, the apparent certainty of their leadership about the benevolent effects of virtually unchanged language and, usually, other social policies. In particular, it is necessary to trace the chain of reasoning that led political and cultural leaders to argue from the alleged neutrality of the languages of the former colonial powers in terms of the nation-building project to the perpetuation of what, after a decade or more of "independence", was palpably a policy of perpetuating class stratification and discrimination, one that deepened and complicated the very ethnic divides that the original policy of officialising the respective European languages was intended to avoid. Another way of addressing this question is to ask what the degree of consciousness of "elite closure" of the new rulers is.

In order to approximate a satisfactory analysis of the political economy of language in contemporary Africa, it is necessary to have recourse to something like the amended version of world systems theory, which

Clayton (2000) calls "constructive structuralism". In line with world systems theory, this approach begins by stressing the fact that language dispensations in specific polities or regions of the world are impacted upon by the global ecology of languages which, stated diachronically but crudely, is itself the product of mass migrations caused by either natural disasters or historical conflicts. Abram de Swaan in a recent economics-based analysis of the linguistic world order, provides an abstract synchronic description as follows:

… (The) worldwide constellation of languages is an integral part of the `world system'. The population of the earth is organized into almost two hundred states and a network of international organizations - the political dimension of the world system; it is coordinated through a concatenation of markets and corporations - the economic dimension; it is linked by electronic media in an encompassing, global culture; and, in its `metabolism with nature', it also constitutes an ecological system. … (The) fact that humanity, divided by a multitude of languages, but connected by a lattice of multilingual speakers, also constitutes a coherent language constellation, as one more dimension of the world system, has so far remained unnoticed. … (de Swaan 2001:1-2)

Because of the constraints of space, it suffices to state that the current "constellations" of "languages", i.e., the super- and subordinate relations that reflect the status of specific languages on local, national, regional and global levels are the consequence of the "evolution" of linguistic markets (in Bourdieu's use of this concept) that themselves are a reflection of power relations among the social strata that constitute the respective entities. As indicated earlier, this particular complex has been studied satisfactorily at a general level of analysis. Clayton's contribution to the complexity of our understanding of what he refers to as the "shaping of hegemony" is the role of agency in general and of subaltern groups or strata in particular. Specifically, he contends that the generalisation in terms of which the "European" language comes to dominate the controlling domains of language does not hold universally, i.e., that under given conditions, it serves the interests of the colonisers better to enhance the status and increase the powerful functions of local or vehicular (or cross-border) languages. In the African context, there are very few relevant cases. Kiswahili and, with some qualifications, Amharic, are perhaps the best African candidates for the status of the exceptions that prove the rule.

A recent strand of analysis that attempts to view the political economy of language in terms of functional multilingualism in economic life runs the risk, in my opinion, of promoting a kind of economic diglossia where the "minority" languages are confined as instruments of communication in the processes of production, exchange and distribution to the so-called informal sector, as against the nationally dominant languages (in Africa, these are almost without exception languages of European origin) that perform these powerful functions in the "formal" economy. This approach to the issue derives from a dual-economy paradigm that has a long history but, even if it had been useful in earlier times, is particularly irrelevant and misleading in the era of globalisation. Ultimately, it may do no more than serve as an apologetic justification for the perpetuation of existing social stratification. In Africa specifically, the languages of the majority of the people have to become the dominant languages, in whatever combinations, in the respective economy, taken as a

whole, of the individual countries. Only if this happens will the danger of a two-tier citizen-subject social model be countered in favour of a democratic system where all are citizens and all have similar life chances. Djité (2005) has written a useful analytical essay on the subject from the point of view not of minorities in Europe, North America, and elsewhere but from that of the "third world", where the "informal economy" is often the major contributor to the GDP or the main source of employment (Djité 2005:15).

Both Djité and Edwards (2005) in mercifully jargon-free essays have demonstrated how in economically more developed countries, this informal sector constitutes a set of niche markets in which, necessarily, local languages are essential for lubricating the economic processes. Edwards also points to the fact that these niche markets are often rapidly occupied by the products of multinational firms. In so doing, she gives one more indication that the "dual economy" is no more than an abstraction. Both of them also insist that the economic benefits of multilingualism should be transferred to the central economies. In respect of Africa, Djité (2005:22) concludes with unerring logic that

Communication facilitated in the local languages will remove the inefficiencies introduced by the selection and promotion of the official language, and policies that promote growth with equity are necessary to achieve socio-economic inclusion for all.

Edwards (2005:164) similarly warns against the establishment of economic diglossia or ghettoisation of the "minority languages" by stating clearly that

English may be the language of global trading, but the ability to speak other languages none the less ensures a competitive edge. The multilingual populations of inner-circle countries are a valuable resource, which we overlook at our peril. Their contribution to international business is becoming increasingly evident in areas such as China and the Middle East. … Initiatives that target minorities rely heavily on the knowledge and experience of minority-language speakers. … Bilinguals are a marketable commodity; the ability to speak other languages opens up a far wider range of better-paid employment opportunities than might otherwise be the case.

Language medium policy, educational access and quality: the case of post-apartheid South Africa

Against this background, a general overview of the impact of language policy and language practice on social inequality acquires much more significance. Ayo Bamgbose, Emeritus Professor for Linguistics and African Languages at Ibadan University, Nigeria, who is also the most senior African scholar in the fields of Applied Linguistics and the Sociology of Language, has written an authoritative study on precisely this subject. In his elegantly written thesis, he provides us with incisive analyses of the many different ways in which languages have been and are used in order to exclude groups and classes of people as well as individuals. Echoing the elite-closure thesis, he arrives at the general conclusion that

The included are a major stumbling block in the use of African languages in a wider range of domains. Apart from lack of political will by those in authority, perhaps the most important factor impeding the increased use of African languages is lack of interest by the elite. They are the ones who are quick to point out that African

languages are not yet well developed to be used in certain domains or that the standard of education is likely to fall, if the imported European languages cease to be used as media of instruction at certain levels of education. Hence, a major part of the non-implementation of policy can be traced to the attitude of those who stand to benefit from the maintenance of the status quo. (Bamgbose 2000:2)

His analyses highlight the fact that in Africa, language policy has, generally speaking, reinforced the creation of a numerically small class of citizens and a majority class of non-citizens. Because of the importance of education in the global knowledge economy, it is, naturally, the pivot on which "development" depends. And it is precisely in this crucial domain that language policy in post-colonial Africa, with hardly any exception, has been an unmitigated disaster. Bamgbose discusses in detail the centrality of mother tongue education for the vast majority of African children as the only option for effective quality education against the background of the widespread social pathology of what I have called the static maintenance syndrome that has undermined all education in post-colonial Africa.

One of the most recent examinations of this complex, by a former Director of the Unesco Regional Office for Africa (in Dakar, Senegal), Professor Pai Obanya, concludes that if education is to become accessible to all, and not only to the privileged elite, it is essential that, at the very least, the "Ife-Appeal" of six years of mother tongue instruction should be implemented throughout the country. And a comprehensive report to African Ministers of Education compiled by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) and the UNESCO Institute for Education refers to "the colossal failure of the educational system" so far in Africa and goes to the logical extent of proclaiming unequivocally that

… (the) use of African languages as MOI (media of instruction N.A.) throughout multilingual educational models is viewed as a realistic solution for the improvement of education in Africa. It is one which requires initial investment, but it is also one which will show promising economic, educational and social returns. (ADEA 2005:30)

By way of example, I shall consider the South African case in terms of access to, and quality of, school education. Extrapolation to the tertiary educational level would simply reinforce the findings of the research that has been done in connection with the school system if one makes allowance for the fact that those who reach the tertiary institutions are usually the "best" in terms of the existing norms and standards.

A University of Cape Town M.Phil. mini-dissertation on the subject of *Medium of Instruction and Its Effect on Matriculation Examination Results in 2000 in Western Cape Secondary Schools* hypothesised that

… African language speaking learners in the Western Cape will tend to do badly in the matriculation examination largely because the medium of instruction and assessment is not the mother tongue, but a second or third language. (October 2002:5)

The dissertation, among other things, compares the results of Afrikaans L1 and English L1 students with those of Xhosa L1 students in key subjects and confirms the hypothesis. The actual statistics are, in the context of the "new" South Africa, ironic and extremely disturbing because they demonstrate all too clearly some of the avoidable continuities between apartheid and post-apartheid education. Probably the most significant finding of this study is that the only "learning area" in which all the matriculation candidates performed at comparable levels was the First Language (Higher Grade) subject, i.e., English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa First Language (Higher Grade). This was, for the Xhosa L1 speakers the only subject in which they were taught and assessed in their mother tongue. Ironically, the results for isiXhosa First Language (Higher Grade) are better than for the other two languages! (See October 2002:76-77)

These findings have been reinforced by a recent, much larger survey of matric results by Simkins and Patterson (2005). Although their point of departure for their inquiry into *Learner Performance in South Africa* is, pedagogically speaking, somewhat conservative, since its preferred model appears to be a transitional bilingual one, they none the less arrive at the conclusion in respect of the causal significance of the language of teaching (medium of instruction) factor that

… social and economic variables at the individual household level do not play an enormous role in determining performance, with the exception of the language variables. Pupils whose home language is an African language are at a considerable disadvantage in the language of instruction by the time they reach Grade 11 if the language of instruction is never spoken at home. This can be offset somewhat if the language of instruction is spoken sometimes at home and it can be offset considerably if the language of instruction is spoken often at home. (Simkins and Patterson 2005:33)

They also claim that competence in the language of instruction is crucial for performance in Mathematics. "Every extra per cent earned in the language test is associated with an addition of one-sixth of a per cent in the mathematics test in Grade 9 and one-third of a percent in Grade 11" (Simkins and Patterson 2005:34). Their study, although limited and preliminary in many respects, has advanced the argument for mother tongue-based education, whether single- or dual-medium is irrelevant in this context, from postulating a correlative (October) to demonstrating a causal relationship between educational success and language medium. As such, it has already given rise to a shift in the perceptions of the political and cultural leadership who, in recent months, have begun speaking more openly and frequently in public about the virtues and benefits of mother tongue education.

One of South Africa's most prominent educational analysts and researchers who, until recently, was at best sceptical about the virtues and practicality of mother tongue education, remarked recently in response to a question about fundamental changes between apartheid and post-apartheid education that

… we haven't made much progress in realising the potential of poor children in terms of giving them quality schooling. … The legacy of apartheid-era education is seen in the poor education of black teachers who, generally, teach black children. The (Joint Education) trust's research shows that the average mark a

sample of grade three teachers in 24 rural schools in SA achieved on a grade six test in their subject was 55%. Teachers are shaky in terms of the subject they are teaching, and this is exacerbated by the language problem. They are not teaching in their own tongue. He praises Education Minister Naledi Pandor for her promotion of mother tongue education, at least in the earlier years of school … (Blaine 2005:17)

In the Western Cape province of South Africa, the government is firmly committed to the implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual education for a minimum of seven years of primary schooling and is investigating the financial and training implications of extending the system into the secondary school.

The extra-mural environment

Unless African languages are given market value, i.e., unless their instrumentality for the processes of production, exchange and distribution is enhanced, no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high-status functions and, thus, eventual escape from the dominance and the hegemony of English (or French or Portuguese where these are the relevant European languages). In the South African context, we have understood for many years already that the language-medium policy caused cognitive impoverishment and, consequently, necessitated investment in compensatory on-the-job training by the private sector in order to enhance the "trainability" of the just-from-school recruits. This wastefulness would be completely avoidable if there were a national development plan in which reform of education and economic development planning were integrated. This would mean that fundamental changes in the language-medium policy would be directly related to the increased use of the African mother tongues, where relevant, in the public service and in the "formal" economy. An articulated programme of job creation and employment on the basis of language proficiencies would, in the South African context also serve as an organic affirmative action programme, one that would not have the unintended consequence of perpetuating and entrenching divisive racial identities inherited from the apartheid past.

Moves in this direction are now increasingly evident, even though they are still offset by negative attitudes in respect of African languages. My former student, Michellé October, who has become a colleague, is researching this area. Preliminarily, she has discerned a definite move on the part of major economic players such as the banking sector, parastatal communications firms and the public service administration towards increased use of African languages at the workplace, in their administration and especially at the interface with customers. One of the country's biggest banks, for example, has made available on their autobank screens instructions in isiZulu and Sesotho and not only in English and Afrikaans, as was the case in the past. According to their latest data, just under 30% of their customers use the two indigenous African languages. They intend making this facility available in all of the 11 official languages of the country. The parastatal South African Broadcasting Corporation has found that during the past financial year (2003 - 2004), they have had a jump in revenue because of the increased provision of local content programmes in African languages. (M. October, personal communication). It is clear that if this trend continues, in all the

different economic sectors and large institutions, including especially the educational system, the market potential of the languages will be enhanced in ways that cannot now be anticipated.

By way of conclusion, I should like to refer to the continental activities of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) which is now recognised as a specialised cultural agency of the African Union with responsibility for language policy and planning. This organisation reflects a profound change that is taking place in the post-colonial landscape. Largely because of the abysmal failure of education, some countries are considering the introduction of mother tongue-based bilingual education as the probably most effective alternative to the transitional and subtractive bilingualism models that have been the norm in Africa since the 1960s. ACALAN has taken on itself the task of planning and coordinating the implementation of a continent-wide programme of language development and status planning with a view to making a fundamental contribution to the solution of the conditions that produce, and reproduce, poverty on the continent. The year 2006 is to be proclaimed the Year of African Languages, during which advocacy and publicity in favour of the use of African languages in high-status functions will be the priority in all the African countries and sub-regions. This reshaping of hegemony, or counter-hegemonic movement, that is being initiated is bound to have major knock-on effects not only in South Africa, but in all the countries of the continent.

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The dominance of English was the result of colonial conquest and the subsequent language of administration policies of the British rulers.

In modern social science jargon, this is a suggestion for more careful studies of the intersection of structure and agency in concrete historical situations.

See, among many others, Bamgbose 2000; Heine 1982**;** Herbert 1992; Prah 1995; Scotton 1990.

For an overview of the most recent and useful analyses of the post-colonial state in Africa, see Chapter 1 of Leonard and Straus (2003). Also see Chapters 3 and 4 of Okumu (2002).

This concept is described by its author as "a tactic of boundary maintenance. It involves institutionalizing the linguistic patterns of the elite, either through official policy or informally established usage norms in order to limit access to socioeconomic mobility and political power to people who possess the requisite linguistic patterns" (Scotton 1990:27). She also makes it clear that in sub-Saharan Africa, we are invariably dealing with cases of "strong elite closure", where the social gap between the elites and the masses is deepened by the dominant position of foreign, i.e., European, languages in which more than half of the population do not have adequate proficiency. (Scotton 1990:27-28)

Clayton's study refers to the relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia but the principles on which his analysis is based hold true for any other comparable situation. As a critique of Phillipson's theses on "linguistic imperialism" as well as of development aid in respect of education, Clayton's work is useful and raises important issues but it is not immediately relevant in the present context.

de Swaan (2001) has an excellent chapter on "language, culture and the unequal exchange of texts" as well as a useful chapter on the persistence of the "colonial" languages in Africa. His chapter on the South African case is, however, less insightful.

See Stroud and Hyltenstam 2005 for an introduction to the field.

Bamgbose, A. 2000. *Language and Exclusion. The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa*. Münster, Hamburg, London: LIT

This language-based analysis is symmetrical in its consequences with Mamdani's portrayal of the colonially generated categories of "citizens" and "subjects". (See Mamdani 1996)

This means simply that most African people are willing to maintain their primary languages in the primary contexts of family, community, primary school and religious practice but they do not believe that these languages have the capacity to develop into languages of power. In terms of Bourdieu's paradigm, their consciousness reflects the reality of the linguistic market and they have become victims of a monolingual habitus, in spite of the fact that most African people are proficient in two or more languages.

In the Nigerian context, this includes the use of a "language of the immediate community" if for any reason the L1 of the child cannot be used.

In spite of this, however, South Africa still has to record an average drop-out rate of 40% of university students tracked over a four-year period and a 20% drop-out of all first-year university students. (See National Assembly 2005, Question 619)

In South Africa, the school-leaving (matriculation) examination is taken at Grade 12.

However dubious such number-crunching might be, the authors have grappled with a large measure of success with the issue of relative weighting of causal factors, which October (2002:77) had been forced to leave in abeyance. Their statistical methods for weighting the effects of different relevant variables are explained in Chapter 3 of the study.

Other important variables such as a good meal once a day and a favourable home literacy environment are essential, of course, but for the first time in post-apartheid South Africa, the language medium has been demonstrated to be a central cause of academic success or failure.

This is largely a function of the fact that proficiency in African languages continues to be inadequately remunerated except at the highest levels of translation and interpreting.

For a full discussion of the ACALAN programme of action, see Alexander 2005.

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