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LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY, NATIONAL AND SUB-NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Neville Alexander

Language Policies

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*Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe:
from linguistic diversity to plurilingual education*

Reference Study

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Preface

This text, part of a series published by the *Language Policy Division*, is clearly significant in its own right because it deals with certain influential factors in the organisation and sociolinguistic foundations of language teaching and in the linguistic ideologies at work in problems related to the languages of Europe. It is, however, part of a larger project since it is one element of a collection of publications focused on the *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe: From Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*.

This *Guide* is both a descriptive and programmatic document whose purpose is to demonstrate the complexity of the questions involved in language teaching, often dealt with in a simplistic manner. It aims to describe the processes and conceptual tools needed for the analysis of educational contexts with respect to languages and for the organisation of language learning and teaching according to the principles of the Council of Europe.

There are several versions of this *Guide* for different audiences, but the *Main version* deals with a number of complex questions, albeit in a limited framework. It seemed necessary to illustrate these questions with case studies, syntheses and studies of specific sectors of language teaching, dealing in monographic form with questions only touched upon in the *Guide*. These *Reference Studies* provide a context for the *Guide*, showing its theoretical bases, sources of further information, areas of research and the themes which underlie it.

The *Modern Languages Division*, now the *Language Policy Division*, demonstrates through this collection of publications its new phase of activity, which is also a continuation of previous activities. The *Division* disseminated through the *Threshold Levels* of the 1970s, a language teaching methodology more focused upon communication and mobility within Europe. It then developed on the basis of a shared educational culture, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (published in its final version in 2001). This is a document which is not concerned with the nature of the contents of language teaching but rather with the form of curricula and syllabi for language teaching. The *Framework* proposes explicit referential levels for identifying degrees of language competence, and thus provides the basis for differentiated management of courses so that opportunities for the teaching of more languages in schools and in lifelong learning are created. This recognition of the intrinsic value of plurilingualism has simultaneously led to the development of an instrument which allows each learner to become aware of and to describe their language repertoire, namely the *European Language Portfolio*. Versions of this are increasingly being developed in member States and were at the heart of the European Year of Languages (2001).

Plurilingualism has been identified in numerous *Recommendations* of the Council of Europe as the principle and the aim of language education policies, and is valued at the individual level as well as being accepted collectively by educational institutions. The *Guide* and the *Reference Studies* provide the link between teaching methods and educational issues on the one hand and policy on

the other, and have the function of making explicit this political principle and of describing concrete measures for implementation.

The relationship of plurilingualism to a sense of identification with other Europeans, with a possible development of a European identity complementing other social identities, national, regional, professional, familial and so on, which all individuals have, is an issue which remains speculative and which can only be confirmed in future generations of plurilingual people. There are however other regions of the world where language education policy is related to questions of identity in a multilingual space. In this study Alexander analyses the evolution of language education and identities in South Africa, pre- and post-apartheid. The situation is fluid and evolving and the precise effect of language education policies remains to be seen, yet the analysis of a sociolinguistically complex society which has a clear purpose of creating a sense of unity and identity has much significance in enabling a reflection on the ways in which language education policy in Europe may affect the sense of a European identity.

This specific aspect of the problems of language education policies in Europe gives a perspective on the general view taken in the *Guide* but nonetheless this text is a part of the fundamental project of the *Language Policy Division*: to create through reflection and exchange of experience and expertise, the consensus necessary for European societies, characterised by their differences and the transcultural currents which create 'globalised nations', not to become lost in the search for the 'perfect' language or languages valued at the expense of others. They should rather recognise the plurality of the languages of Europe and the plurilingualism, actual or potential, of all those who live in this space, as a condition for collective creativity and for development, a component of democratic citizenship through linguistic tolerance, and therefore as a fundamental value of their actions in languages and language teaching.

Jean-Claude Beacco and Michael Byram

1. Introduction

In *The Power of Identity*, the second volume of his well-known work on the network society, the celebrated urban sociologist, Manuel Castells, among other important statements, maintains that

While *sovetskii narod* was not necessarily a failing identity project, it disintegrated before it could settle in the minds and lives of the people of the Soviet Union. *Thus, the Soviet experience belies the theory according to which the state can construct national identity by itself.* The most powerful state, using the most comprehensive ideological apparatus in history for more than seven decades, failed in recombining historical materials and projected myths into the making of a new identity. Communities may be imagined, but not necessarily believed (Castells 1997:39. My italics).

This innocent-looking statement of apparent fact, among others, led a group of South African scholars, including this author, to engage with Castells in a debate about the implications of the theoretical and strategic positions which he puts forward in his trilogy on the information age and the network society¹. My own focus was on the question of national and sub-national identities. It suddenly became clear to us that one of the most startling implications of Castells' position was that the cherished notion of "a non-racial South Africa" might just turn out to be a will-o'-the-wisp. For, if after 70 years of authoritarian rule, it had been impossible for the ideologues and strategists of the former Soviet Union to bring about some sense of a Soviet identity, what hope was there for the ruling groups in a new historical community such as that which is emerging in post-apartheid South Africa of bringing about a cohesiveness that would keep intact the territorial integrity and the political coherence of the new state? With this in mind, I wrote as follows:

It is clear that the decisive phrase in this passage is "by itself", since it allows the content of the statement to become obscured through an unelaborated qualification. It ought to be equally clear to any "new" South African that this inference has the most portentous implications for the promotion of national unity in post-apartheid South Africa. If it is correct, it may well leave us stranded with a rainbow in our eyes but without the pot of gold in the form of the (non-racial!) "nation" (Alexander 2001:129).

The debate with Castells, which took place at a series of seminars and symposia in the course of the months of June and July 2000 in three South African cities, afforded us the opportunity to rehearse, among other things, all the most important theoretical and political arguments that inhere in what is now generally referred to as "identity politics". That this is a matter of life and death for South African citizens is realised – vaguely, by some, terribly clearly by most – but only very few non-Afrikaner scholars and political or cultural leaders have

¹ See Muller *et al.* 2001.

written extensively on the issue, more especially on the relationship between language, identity and citizenship education. In recent months, however, the country's Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, has unleashed a series of conferences and symposia on the question of the "core values" of the new South Africa. One of these values, it has been repeated at one celebratory occasion after another, is precisely "multilingualism".

2. Historical background

Before I proceed to discuss the relationship between language and identity in post-apartheid South Africa, it is necessary to make a few brief remarks about the historical background to the situation we are confronted with today. For the purposes of this essay, it suffices that we go back in time no further than the years immediately following on the defeat of the Boer generals in what is generally known as the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Lord Milner, the British High Commissioner appointed to administer the defeated Boer Republics introduced a punitive Anglicisation policy, directed in the first instance at the white Afrikaans-speaking community throughout the territory that became the Union of South Africa in 1910. In this regard, the language policy of the conquerors was no different from that pursued in most comparable situations. In the context of South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, however, there are two significant points to emphasise. These are, firstly, the reaction of the Afrikaner community and, secondly, the impact which the policy had on the black African language-speaking population of the territory.

The policy gave rise to what eventually became among white Afrikaans-speaking people a rabid, racist and narrow ethnic chauvinism, based essentially on shared language, religious orientation and alleged descent (see, among other studies, Scholz 1965, Alexander 1989, DuPlessis and DuPlessis 1987, Mesthrie 1995). In a word, Milnerism, as it came to be called, helped to entrench the racist version of Afrikaner nationalism that eventually gave birth to the political policy of apartheid. Language became the issue around which the ethnic consciousness of what in effect came to be "the Afrikaner community", i.e., white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, crystallised. The fact that the struggle for the recognition of their language as an official language equal in status to English in the new dominion of the Union of South Africa was closely related to the struggle for "their" land and the independence of the republics they had lost and in which, among other things, gold and diamond deposits had been found, gave rise to a habitus in which certain "white" varieties of the Afrikaans language featured as one of the criteria for being Afrikaner. This passion for the language has had extremely destructive effects, as manifested, for example, in the Soweto uprising of the black youth in 1976 against the unjust imposition on black schoolchildren of Afrikaans-medium (next to English-medium) instruction in the racially segregated classrooms of that time. On the other hand, in a mephistophelian turn of events, this same passion has led to a situation in post-apartheid South Africa where the continuing struggle of Afrikaans-speaking people for the equality of status of their mother tongue is in fact helping to ensure that a democratic language dispensation will be maintained and expanded for the foreseeable future.

Milner's policy also reinforced the tendency among what is known in South African history as the "mission elite", i.e., the tiny layer of black teachers, preachers, interpreters, clerks and other professionals which the colonial system had necessarily given rise to, to view proficiency in the English language as their passport to upward social and economic mobility. The yawning gulf between the potential political and cultural elite on the one hand and the masses of the oppressed black people, on the other hand, was thereby widened beyond any hope of bridging during the next few generations. A typical example of the resultant "colonised mind" (Ngugi 1981) comes from the most prominent leader of the 'coloured community' at the turn of the 19th century, viz., the President of the African People's Organisation, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman. In this presidential capacity, he was called upon to persuade the intellectual leadership of this group of people of diverse origin to decide which way to go in the light of the imminent dominion status that was to be conferred on South Africa after the defeat of the Boers in 1902. Like his peers among the "coloured" people and among other linguistic communities in South Africa, he had no doubts whatsoever in regard to the language question. For a South African, what is most significant about this statement is the fact that it does not even consider it worthy of mention that besides Afrikaans and English, there was (and is today) a wealth of African (Bantu) languages used by more than 75% of the population as their principal means of communication.

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).

In the official newsletter of the APO, we read the following editorial, probably written by Abdurahman himself, in which the "coloureds" are enjoined to:

endeavour to perfect themselves in English - the language which inspires the noblest thoughts of freedom and liberty, the language that has the finest literature on earth and is the most universally useful of all languages. Let everyone...drop the habit as far as possible, of expressing themselves in the barbarous Cape Dutch that is too often heard (APO, 13/8/1910, cited in Adhikari 1996:8)

This position which was, as I have already intimated, taken up by virtually all leaders of the - essentially ethnic - political organisations of the disenfranchised majority of the people throughout the 20th century, with only a handful of exceptions, is the explanation for what I have called elsewhere (Alexander 2002) the "Static Maintenance Syndrome" that debilitates and paralyzes most African language speakers. This refers to an attitude of mind, which is prevalent throughout the African continent, and which manifests itself as a sense of resignation about the perceived and imputed powerlessness of the local or indigenous languages of Africa. Most of the people are willing to maintain their primary languages in family, community and religious contexts 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. Paradoxically, in South Africa, English, the dominant and well-nigh universal target language, is not usually one of these! Because the race question was the salient issue for black people under the successive white supremacist regimes throughout the 20th century, there was no equivalent to the cultural-political movement that characterised the struggles of the (enfranchised) Afrikaner community. Black political organisations, whether organised on a racial or non-racial basis, fought in the first and last instance for the eradication of racial oppression and racial inequality. Consequently, ethnic, cultural and linguistic questions had a very low priority on their respective agendas.

It is significant, therefore, that before the 1990s, attempts at cultural mobilisation involving especially literacy projects among black working class people, which tended to correspond to the level of political repression in any given period, had only indifferent success. One of the saddest results of this neglect of cultural politics on the part of the political leadership of the oppressed people of South Africa throughout the 20th century is that the present generation of politically literate adults among English and Afrikaans speakers have little or no proficiency in any African language, with the consequent communication gap that renders the "nation building" project of former President Mandela and the African National Congress extremely difficult and well-nigh impossible within the next generation. Another consequence of possibly lasting significance is the dearth of creative as well as scholarly, analytical literature in the African languages. The disadvantage becomes more marked when one compares the situation of the African (Bantu and Khoe-San) languages with that of Afrikaans, even when one discounts for the unequal distribution of political power during the period in question.

To put it differently, the anglophile orientation of the black leadership stunted the development of a reading culture and, thus, of creative writing and scholarly endeavour in the African languages. The political leadership of the white minority, which ruled the country for 90 years (between 1905 and 1994) adopted a policy of colonial bilingualism in terms of which all white citizens, regardless of language or cultural background had to be bilingual in English and Afrikaans. At the same time, the white leadership was content with tolerating the offspring of the mission elite in the milieu of the "white society" as long as its individual members were fluent in either English or Afrikaans, or in both languages. Towards the African languages, a position of benign neglect was adopted, one which reinforced the complete marginality of these languages in South African political, economic and even cultural life.

In the educational sphere specifically, pitifully few African and other black children could afford to study, if at all, beyond the first few years of primary schooling. Since most black men and women were prepared, in the words of Sir Langham Dale, the Superintendent-General of Education of the Cape Colony in 1889, for life in "a subordinate society", there was no need for them to be literate (see Marais 1962:271-272). Their station in life was that of unskilled or at best

semi-skilled labourers and communal cultivators. As indicated earlier, the few people needed to lubricate the system by means of their bilingual (mother tongue and English or Afrikaans) proficiency, were trained and accustomed to “the discipline of toil” (Fisher 1949) in mission schools until the early 1950s when the apartheid regime summarily swept away the institution of mission schools in the interest of better social engineering.

Although there was no explicitly stated policy of divide and rule based on ethnic criteria before 1948, the de facto policy of all the segregationist governments was one of “tribal” separation in “native reserves” and influx control to keep the black men and women from flooding into the evolving cities. These objectives were realised with the utmost cynicism and brutality by means of the hated pass laws. Black resistance to these and other segregationist measures took many forms. In the sphere in which we are interested in this paper, i.e. language education and identity formation, the first political organisations of the black African, the “coloured” and the Indian people mobilised their respective constituencies in an integrationist, counter-hegemonic albeit within a fundamentally ethnic framework. In other words, their instinctive resistance to the palpable injustices meted out to them was to come together in organisations that demanded integration into the emerging polity on a basis of equal citizenship. What eventually became the African National Congress in 1912 explicitly had the objective of reducing the distance between the “tribes” (linguistic and ethnic communities) and of building one nation of African people. Thus, the sixth “objective” enshrined in the Constitution of the South African Native National Congress (as it was known until 1923) reads:

To encourage mutual understanding and to bring together into common action as one political people all tribes and clans of various tribes or races and by means of combined effort and united political organisation to defend their freedom, rights and privileges (see Karis and Carter 1987:77).

Generally speaking, people of slave and so-called mixed ancestry - usually labelled “coloured” - tended to oscillate between the white and black ends of the racial spectrum as far as their ethnic allegiance was concerned. However, as the quotations from the speeches and writings of Dr Abdurahman demonstrate, the irresistible pull of English and of the European culture predominated among the intelligentsia. This was to remain until the mid-1960s, when the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement under the leadership of Steve Biko and his colleagues facilitated the emergence of a new identity, i.e., that of “black” people, by which was meant all people who were “not white”. People of Indian origin, mostly the descendants of indentured labourers, the first of whom arrived in Natal in 1860, were perceived, and tended to regard themselves as, a racial and cultural minority in the Union of South Africa. Like the “coloured” population, which was largely descended from the slave and Khoe (previously “Hottentot”) population of the 17th and 18th centuries, the children of these “temporary slaves” tended to adopt the language of the master class. In the former case, that language was a creolised form of Dutch, now Afrikaans, in the case of the latter, a variety of English (see Broeder *et al* 2002:64-68).

In the pre-apartheid period, language education practice among the people was essentially subtractive in the sense that the first language is abandoned or suppressed. Indigenous African language varieties were thus used as languages of initial literacy with a view to making the transition to English, sometimes Afrikaans, literacy as soon and as smoothly as possible. As indicated previously, there was no serious effort to cultivate or to develop literacy on a large scale in any of the African languages.

One point of light should be mentioned, however, especially as the initiative concerned had a belated resonance in the 1980s and the 1990s. In 1944, Jacob Nhlapo, a well-known educator and member of the African National Congress, proposed the harmonisation of the mutually intelligible varieties of the Nguni cluster of Bantu languages (mainly isiZulu and isiXhosa) on the one hand, and of the mutually intelligible varieties in the Sotho cluster (mainly Sepedi, Setswana and Sesotho) with a view to creating two standard written languages out of the many different spoken varieties. To quote 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 Africans to love and freely use them? (Cited in Alexander 1989:32-33).

Just how conscious this visionary was of the identity options with which the oppressed black people were faced and what the implications of their language choices were can be inferred from the continuation of this particular passage:

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 we ever 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 (Cited in Alexander 1989:33).

When we compare this position with that suggested by the excerpt from the speech and article by Abdurahman some forty years earlier, it is significant in terms of the complete change of direction implied by it. Nhlapo, however, was decades ahead of his time and his suggestion was shot down in flames by his peers inside and outside the African National Congress. In the light of the positions we have arrived at in the new South Africa (see below), however, both his suggestion about the feasibility of the harmonisation (or re-standardisation) of the African languages and his implicit proposal for a variant of bilingual education, involving the mother tongue and English, are an index to his foresight.

3. Notes on language education policy in the apartheid era

At bottom, the language education policy that eventually came to characterise apartheid schooling reflected the grotesque attempt of the white nationalist leadership to Afrikanerise South Africa, i.e., to replace the dominance and perhaps even the hegemony of English with the dominance of Afrikaans language and culture. That this was a futile strategy, doomed to fail because of its deliberate refusal to take into account the global and domestic functions and status of English, is now perfectly obvious. The 45-years' detour in the modern history of South Africa, which is what this era represents for those who lived through it, like similar episodes in the history of all peoples, has none the less left a legacy with which we are still coming to terms and which will occupy the minds and steer the efforts of many men and women for decades to come.

From the point of view of identity politics, apartheid was one of the most explicit and self-conscious modern strategies of social engineering. Mother-tongue education was legitimated in terms of the then novel position of the UNESCO scholars as the optimal language-medium policy for effective and meaningful education. By way of a reminder of the precise manner in which the matter was formulated by them, I cite the following passage (see UNESCO 1953:11):

It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his (sic) mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. But,..., it is not always possible to use the mother tongue in school and, even when possible, some factors may impede or condition its use.

On the surface, therefore, the official language-medium policy was in line with the most up-to-date international educational research and was approached by its fathers, Dr Eiselen and Dr Verwoerd, as a logical extension of the endeavour of the Afrikaner "nation" to other South African social groups in what was conceptualised as a multi-national state. In short, the use of the "standard"² indigenous varieties of the African languages was a cynical manoeuvre, supported disingenuously by means of "scholarly" evidence, to promote the "retribalisation" or ethnicisation of the African people. As indicated already, the history of the political resistance to segregation and by extension to apartheid was one of creating larger social identities rather than one of ethnic fragmentation. The architects of apartheid called on the hallowed traditions of German romantic philosophy as well as on the actual practice of European

² These standard forms are in many cases quite unstable and are often rejected by many users of the languages. This instability and the recentness of these standards are added arguments in favour of those of us who wish to promote the re-standardisation of the African languages (see Ansre. 1974).

missionaries in southern Africa³ in order to create the impression that their agenda was no different from the decolonisation agenda of the British and (later) of the French, which gained momentum from about 1955 onwards.

The actual results in the black schools were disastrous on numerous counts. Most of the anglophile political and cultural leadership opposed the Bantu Education policy precisely because they understood the hidden curriculum (retribalisation, divide-and-rule tactics) but also because they had, as indicated earlier, come to equate all worthwhile education with the English language. The fact that a blatantly inferior and humiliating curriculum was being mediated through the indigenous languages of the people constituted a mountainous dilemma for those whose first language was a Bantu language. The same applied to a lesser degree to large numbers of black Afrikaans-speaking (mostly so-called coloured) people, most of whom did not have the same passionate commitment to the language, as was the case with their white counterparts. For, as Dr Abdurahman and his generation of leaders had heralded, English became the language of upward mobility also for Afrikaans-speaking middle class and aspiring middle-class people. Most black people came to hate Afrikaans, i.e., the standard form of the language (known as Algemeen Beskaafde Afrikaans – General Civilised Afrikaans!) as “the language of the oppressor”. In their eyes, Verwoerdism came to have the same enemy status as Milnerism had had for Afrikaners at the beginning of the 20th century. The last straw came in 1975-76, when the Bantu Education Ministry insisted that Afrikaans and English should be used as joint media of instruction in the senior primary and junior secondary schools for black children. The Soweto uprising which began on 16 June 1976 not only heralded the final rejection of Bantu Education. Retrospectively, it is clear that it also marked the beginning of the end of the apartheid experiment in social engineering. Ethnic separation and ethnic separatism were decisively and dramatically rejected by the black people. The suspicion of all ethnically based political and educational proposals that this struggle engendered has had an enduring impact on the consciousness of most South Africans. Today, still, one of the most difficult tasks that confront progressive educationalists in South Africa is the rehabilitation of mother tongue education not only as a valid

³ The late Leroy Vail (1991) edited a seminal volume on *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, in which numerous practical examples of the particular ways in which tradition was “invented” in southern Africa are described and analysed by some of the most reputable Southern Africanists. Shula Marks (1986:111-112), after pointing to the orthodox explanation of the invention of tradition paradigm, describes an aspect of this process as follows:

James Stuart, assistant magistrate of Durban in the early years of this (20th NA) century, who was keenly concerned with what he saw as the dangers of “detrribalisation” (i.e. proletarianization) and the undermining of “the discipline of tribal life”, was the first systematic recorder of Zulu “oral tradition” and the author of a series of vernacular histories of the Zulu people and their warrior kings. Their popularity as school readers may have partly assisted in the legitimation for the intelligentsia of their ethnic nationalism. Thus, from being a threat to the colonial order, Zulu history and the Zulu monarchy became a crucial part of the strategy of social control.

educational strategy but as the most likely strategy to redress the educational imbalances that we have inherited from the past. Paradoxically, the only children who enjoy all the advantages of mother tongue education from the cradle to the university and beyond are in fact L1-speakers of English and of Afrikaans.

An even more absurd paradox is manifest in the fact that because of six to eight years of mother tongue education, the matriculation (school-leaving) examination results of black students during what Heugh (2000:24-25) calls “the first phase” of Bantu education were incomparably better than anything before or after. In her own words:

Despite the cognitively impoverished curriculum, eight years of mother tongue instruction gave pupils the time to learn their own language through this language and to learn a second and a third language sufficiently well to make the switch in medium in the ninth year. During the first phase of Bantu Education, 1953-76, the matriculation results improved, despite the poor curriculum.... (Heugh 2000:24)

After the student uprising in 1976, the apartheid authorities were compelled to scrap the first-phase approach and had to allow a reduction of mother tongue education to the first three or four years of primary schooling. For all practical purposes, Afrikaans-medium instruction disappeared from virtually all schools for black children, even though they were still compelled to offer it as a subject at matriculation level since it was one of the two official languages of the apartheid republic. Heugh (2000:24-25) demonstrates the precipitous decline in the matriculation pass rate for black examination candidates in the ensuing 20 years. This trend has continued despite all attempts to alter it. Because the matric failure rate is the result of, among other things, the subtractive language medium policy which is itself due to the static maintenance syndrome I referred to earlier, it is one of the most devastating legacies of the apartheid era, one from which it will take decades to recover.

4. Language education policy since 1994

After an extremely problematic start during the first seven years of the new Republic of South Africa, language education policy appears to be on the road towards finding a definite direction. Although the gap between the constitutional and legislative position on the one hand, and the actual practices in the classrooms and lecture halls of the country on the other hand, remains very wide and often appears to be widening, the fact that these instruments exist is of the greatest significance. They represent democratic space for the legal and peaceful promotion of multilingualism and for mother tongue based bilingual education in South Africa (see Appendices). Moreover, recent developments indicate that on the part of the state, there is a definite albeit problematic commitment to the constitutional provisions on language and language education.

If apartheid language policy had intentionally promoted and entrenched old and new social divisions, the language policy of the new South Africa is clearly geared to the strategy of reconciliation and nation building, which was the defining feature of former President Mandela’s government. Both the constitution of the country and the language policy in education take it as their

point of departure that the 11 official languages shall have equality of status and “parity of esteem”. All the languages used in the country are deemed to be assets rather than problems. However, there is no doubt that in practice, the state bureaucracy as well as most of the political leadership are trapped in the language-is-a-problem paradigm. The public service is rapidly sliding in the direction of unilingualism in spite of the constitutional provision for the use of a minimum of two languages at both national and provincial levels. This has unsettled especially the Afrikaans-speaking, mainly the white Afrikaans-speaking, community who fear that the hard-earned equality between Afrikaans and English is about to disappear because of the anglophile bias of the rising black middle class. As the most organised language group, the Afrikaans-speaking people are willy-nilly indicating the direction in which things could move once the racial fault line that still marks the salient division in South Africa has been addressed. That is to say, once the preoccupation of South Africans with the race question is no longer as central as it continues to be today, it is very likely that the language marker will become the next major plank for political mobilisation. In this sense, the present agitation of the Afrikaans-speaking community for the maintenance and expansion of their linguistic human rights, even if some circles are motivated by ethnicist and overtly racist, considerations, will become a model for other “linguistic communities”.

It is significant that the political class, specifically the black elite uses the pro-English argument precisely on the grounds that this may help to undermine the latent ethnic divisiveness of language-based mobilisation, as well as the inherited racial identities of the apartheid and colonial past. Debates in the media centre on the simplistic and inarticulate belief that if only all the people of the country could rapidly acquire a knowledge of the English language, all communication problems and, therefore, inter-group tensions, will disappear. Those who, in consonance with the constitution and the evolving language legislation, stand for a multilingual (plurilingual) solution, one which includes the English language as a necessary term in any language policy equation, are still a small minority of the policy-influencing strata. For the masses of the people, the language issue remains only marginally important. Their immediate concerns are directly material insofar as they need secure jobs, housing, health and access to secondary and tertiary education for their children.

5. Language planning

Post-apartheid South Africa has established an impressive array of language-planning agencies and other language policy implementation institutions. Among the more important of these are the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB), an independent statutory body, which has the mandate to advise central and provincial government on all matters pertaining to language policy and language use. At approximately the same level, there is the National Language Service (NLS), which is the state’s language arm located in the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. Although many of the functions of these two super language planning agencies tend to overlap, the NLS is much more focused on practical issues of translation, interpreting and language technology. PANSALB has a provincial language body in each of the

nine provinces and each of the 11 official languages has (on paper) a lexicographic unit, usually located in one or more universities. There are also 14 National Language Bodies, which have the task of seeing to the corpus development of the respective languages. On paper, therefore, the language infrastructure appears to be in place. However, as I have indicated, there are many practical problems as well as lack of political will and strategic clarity in respect of the evolving language dispensation. These factors result in a frustrating zig-zag process from the point of view of those who realise that the transitional period in post-apartheid South Africa, with its distinctive sense and expectation of change and transformation represents a unique opportunity for making major advances on the road to a truly democratic multilingual and multicultural society. Not to make use of this rare opportunity would be tantamount to retarding the realisation of the developmental potential of one of the wealthiest countries on the continent.

In summary, the issues can be stated simply. Language policy in education has to promote inter-group communication and understanding. The best way of doing so is via mother tongue-based bilingual education and the promotion of individual multilingualism (or plurilingualism) rather than by means of reliance on a *lingua franca* only. This is the rationale for the official language education policy of “additive bilingualism”(i.e., the addition of another language and maintenance of the first/mother language). This is now being re-baptised “mother tongue-based bilingual education” as it is argued that this formulation is more easily comprehensible to non-specialists. It also has the advantage that in a context of continuing suspicion about the value of mother tongue education, it suggests very clearly that the objective of the system goes beyond the use of the mother tongue as a language of learning in that it points to the learning of additional languages and to their use as languages of teaching. This trajectory has advanced furthest in the Western Cape Province where the new Minister of Education has appointed a Task Team to draft an implementation plan for the introduction of seven years of mother tongue education and the learning of a third language. In the context of this province, the three official languages, i.e., Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa, are expected to be learned by all primary school pupils. On the African continent, this move is no less than revolutionary. Nowhere south of the Sahara is any official provision made for mother tongue education beyond the third or fourth year. And where there are indications of a return to mother tongue education, these remain at the moment in the realm of rhetoric, whereas the entire thrust of the policy of the Western Cape is towards budget provision for the implementation of a policy whose time, it is thought, has come.

6. Conclusion

In concluding this broad-brush description of the relationship between language education and identity formation in South Africa and bearing in mind Manuel Castells’ scepticism about the capacity of the state to create and consolidate social identities, we should ask explicitly: *Is it likely that the explicit and implicit language planning (from above, by government, and from below, by NGOs) will help to bring about the non-racial unity promised in the new constitution?*

For the foreseeable future, the question of ethnic identities remains an issue just below the political horizon. Except for conservative white Afrikaans-speaking people – and for some Zulu-speaking people –, the language question is not yet one around which major political mobilisations can be undertaken⁴. Class issues are much more salient because of the depredations of the macro-economic policy which the present government appears to be totally committed to, and which has led to large-scale job losses, homelessness and general social diseases. Moreover, the relapse into racial identities that has taken place because of the implementation of affirmative action and black empowerment measures in both the public and the private sectors, has caused the main debates on individual and collective identities to centre on “race” rather than on language. This is no reason to be complacent, however. As I have suggested earlier, once the racial question has been “settled”, even if only temporarily, there can be little doubt that the language divisions will present themselves as eminently exploitable for purposes of mobilisation. In the case of some small communities such as the Khoe and the San, the Northern Ndebele-speaking people and a few others, ethnic entrepreneurs are already hard at work in order to make their way closer to the national trough by means of mobilising their “ethnic” constituency.

Be that as it may, it is precisely this danger of language-based conflict within the next generation that makes the policy of promoting multilingualism and individual plurilingualism such an urgent and critically important imperative. South Africa still has the time and it has the human and material resources to head off the kind of ethnic conflicts that have reduced much of Africa south of the Sahara to historical rubble. For this reason, it is essential that the strategy of “making multilingualism work”, expressed in the Overview Document of the Revised National Curriculum Statement, Grades R-9 (DoE 2002:7), signals the beginning of major struggles around the clarification of this concept in the changing landscape of South African social life. As yet, only the sketchiest of scenarios are discernible, even though the protagonists on all sides conduct themselves with the greatest degree of self-confidence.

Whether or not the attainment of “a non-racial, non-sexist, united democratic South Africa” is feasible in the medium to long term may depend on whether or not it will be possible to deflect on to the language domain the latent explosions and implosions generated by the friction of racial prejudice and racial inequality and perpetuated because of the resurgence of the discourse of racial identities associated with any affirmative action programme. Put simply: in post-apartheid South Africa, we have to undertake the attempt to construct a language dispensation such that a spectrum of linguistic communities, a network of social communication, is created through which sub-national language-based identities continue to function even as they are changing, without at any stage posing a threat to the sense of national unity that is being promoted in all domains of the society. For this to happen, it is essential that vested economic interests be prevented from getting linked to ethnic consciousness in any significant manner.

⁴ In Stephen May’s terms, the African languages are, for most native speakers, merely “associated languages”, i.e. they are associated with other cultural practices as markers of a sub-national identity (See May 2002:135-136).

Hence, also, the importance of plurilingual individuals and of promoting respect for all the languages used in the polity. A multilingual habitus has to come into being so that the danger of ethnic fragmentation and widespread civil conflict based on linguistic affiliation will become unthinkable.

In post-apartheid South Africa, this scenario is perfectly feasible. At a time when the once apparently monolithic Afrikaner identity is disintegrating in the full view of the citizens of the country, the fact that all the multiple individual and collective identities are being contested and re-negotiated gives us hope that a constructive and more unifying language dispensation will be established. Such a dispensation will help to consolidate the democratic traditions and practices that have already assumed definite patterns of interaction, including interactions between groups of people who are marked by linguistic and other differences. The belief, professed by most of South Africa's leadership, that future generations of South Africans will be defined by their relative proficiency in at least three South African languages, of which English is bound to be one, is the realistic basis of the current optimism about the possible contribution of language education to the realisation of national unity.

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Appendix 1

THE CONSTITUTION of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. (Act 108 of 1996)

Provisions on Languages

Section 6: Languages

(i) The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

(ii) Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.

(iii) (a) The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.

(b) Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.

(iv) The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.

(v) A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must:

(a) promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of:

(vi) all official languages;

(vii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and

(viii) sign language; and

(b) promote and ensure respect for:

(ix) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and

(x) Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

Section 29: Education

- (1) Everyone has the right:
 - (2) to a basic education, including adult basic education; and
 - (3) to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.
- (2) Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account:
 - a. equity;
 - b. practicability; and
 - c. the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.

Section 30: Language and culture

Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights.

Section 31: Cultural, religious and linguistic communities

- (xi) Persons belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community may not be denied the right, with other members of that community:
 - (a) to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language; and
 - (b) to form, join and maintain cultural, religious and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.

Section 35: Arrested, detained and accused persons

- (3) Every accused person has a right to a fair trial, which includes the right:
 - (k) to be tried in a language that the accused person understands or, if that is not practicable, to have the proceedings interpreted in that language.
- (4) Whenever this section requires information to be given to a person, that information must be given in a language that the person understands.

Appendix 2

LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY 14 JULY 1997

1. The language in education policy documents which follow have been the subject of discussions and debate with a wide range of education stakeholders and role-players. They have also been the subject of formal public comment following their publication on 9 May 1997 (Government Notice No. 383, Vol. 17997).

2. Two policies are announced herewith, namely, the LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY IN TERMS OF SECTION 3(4)(m) OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY ACT, 1996 (ACT 27 OF 1996), and the NORMS AND STANDARDS REGARDING LANGUAGE POLICY PUBLISHED IN TERMS OF SECTION 6(1) OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS ACT, 1996. While these two policies have different objectives, they complement each other and should at all times be read together rather than separately.

3. Section 4.4 of the Language in Education Policy relates to the current situation. The new curriculum, which will be implemented from 1998, onwards, will necessitate new measures which will be announced in due course.

4. LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION POLICY IN TERMS OF SECTION 3(4)(m) OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY ACT, 1996 (ACT 27 OF 1996).

1. PREAMBLE

2. This Language-in-Education Policy Document should be seen as part of a continuous process by which policy for language in education is being developed as part of a national language plan encompassing all sectors of society, including the deaf community. As such, it operates within the following paradigm:

1. In terms of the new Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the government, and thus the Department of Education, recognises that our cultural diversity is a valuable national asset and hence is tasked, amongst other things, to promote multilingualism, the development of the official languages, and respect for all languages used in the country, including South African Sign Language and the languages referred to in the South African Constitution.

2. The inherited language-in-education policy in South Africa has been fraught with tensions, contradictions and sensitivities, and underpinned by racial and linguistic discrimination. A number of these discriminatory policies have affected either the access of the learners to the education system or their success within it.

3. The new language in education policy is conceived of as an integral and necessary aspect of the new government's strategy of building a non-racial nation in South Africa. It is meant to facilitate communication across the barriers of colour, language and region, while at the same time creating an environment in which respect for languages other than one's own would be encouraged.

4. This approach is in line with the fact that both societal and individual multilingualism are the global norm today, especially on the African continent. As such, it assumes that the learning of more than one language should be general practice and principle in our society. That is to say, being multilingual should be a defining characteristic of being South African. It is constructed also to counter any particularistic ethnic chauvinism or separatism through mutual understanding.

5. A wide spectrum of opinions exists as to the locally viable approaches towards multilingual education, ranging from arguments in favour of the cognitive benefits and cost-effectiveness of teaching through one medium (home language) and learning additional language(s) as subjects, to those drawing on comparative international experience demonstrating that, under appropriate conditions, most learners benefit cognitively and emotionally from the type of structured bilingual education found in dual-medium (also known as two-way immersion) programmes. Whichever route is followed, the underlying principle is to maintain home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s). Hence, the Department's position that an additive approach to bilingualism is to be seen as the normal orientation of our language-in-education policy. With regard to the delivery system, policy will progressively be guided by the results of comparative research, both locally and internationally.

6. The right to choose the language of learning and teaching is vested in the individual. This right has, however, to be exercised within the overall framework of the obligation on the education system to promote multilingualism.

3. This paradigm also presupposes a more fluid relationship between languages and culture than is generally understood in the Eurocentric model which we have inherited in South Africa. It accepts a priori that there is no contradiction in a multicultural society between a core of common cultural traits, beliefs, practices, etc., and particular sectional or communal cultures. Indeed, the relationship between the two can and should be mutually reinforcing and, if properly managed, should give rise to and sustain genuine respect for the variability of the communities that constitute our emerging nation.

4. AIMS

5. The main aims of the Ministry of Education's policy for language in education are:

1. to promote full participation in society and the economy through equitable and meaningful access to education;
2. to pursue the language policy most supportive of general conceptual growth amongst learners, and hence to establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education;
3. to promote and develop all the official languages;
4. to support the teaching and learning of all other languages required by learners or used by communities in South Africa, including languages used for religious purposes, languages which are important for international trade and communication, and South African Sign Language, as well as Alternative and

Augmentative Communication;

5. to counter disadvantages resulting from different kinds of mismatches between home languages and languages of learning and teaching;

6. to develop programmes for the redress of previously disadvantaged languages....

8. POLICY: LANGUAGE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

The language(s) of learning and teaching in a public school must be (an) official language(s).

6. NORMS AND STANDARDS REGARDING LANGUAGE POLICY PUBLISHED IN TERMS OF SECTION 6(1) OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS ACT, 1996

1. INTRODUCTION

1. AIM OF THESE NORMS AND STANDARDS

1. Recognising that diversity is a valuable asset, which the state is required to respect, the aim of these norms and standards is the promotion, fulfilment and development of the state's overarching language goals in school education in compliance with the Constitution, namely:

1. the protection, promotion, fulfilment and extension of the individual's language rights and means of communication in education; and
2. the facilitation of national and international communication through promotion of bi- or multilingualism through cost-efficient and effective mechanisms,
3. to redress the neglect of the historically disadvantaged languages in school education.

3. DEFINITIONS

4. In these norms and standards, unless the context otherwise indicates, words and expressions contained in the definitions in the Act shall have corresponding meanings; and the following words and phrases shall have the following meanings:

1. "the Act" means the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996
2. "the Constitution" means the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996
3. "school district" means a geographical unit as determined by the relevant provincial legislation, or prevailing provincial practice
4. "language" means all official languages recognised in the Constitution, and also South African Sign Language, as well as Alternative and Augmentative Communication.

3. THE PROTECTION OF INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

1. The parent exercises the minor learner's language rights on behalf of the minor

learner. Learners who come of age, are hereafter referred to as the learner, which concept will include also the parent in the case of minor learners.

2. The learner must choose the language of teaching upon application for admission to a particular school.

3. Where a school uses the language of learning and teaching chosen by the learner, and where there is a place available in the relevant grade, the school must admit the learner.

4. Where no school in a school district offers the desired language as a medium of learning and teaching, the learner may request the provincial education department to make provision for instruction in the chosen language, and section 5.3.2 must apply. The provincial education department must make copies of the request available to all schools in the relevant school district.

5. THE RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF THE SCHOOL

1. Subject to any law dealing with language in education and the Constitutional rights of learners, in determining the language policy of the school, the governing body must stipulate how the school will promote multilingualism through using more than one language of learning and teaching, and/or by offering additional languages as fully-fledged subjects, and/or applying special immersion or language maintenance programmes, or through other means approved by the head of the provincial education department. (This does not apply to learners who are seriously challenged with regard to language development, intellectual development, as determined by the provincial department of education.)

2. Where there are less than 40 requests in Grades 1 to 6, or less than 35 requests in Grades 7 to 12 for instruction in a language in a given grade not already offered by a school in a particular school district, the head of the provincial department of education will determine how the needs of those learners will be met, taking into account

1. the duty of the state and the right of the learners in terms of the Constitution, including
2. the need to achieve equity,
3. the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices,
4. practicability, and
5. the advice of the governing bodies and principals of the public schools concerned.

7. THE RIGHTS AND DUTIES OF THE PROVINCIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS

1. The provincial education department must keep a register of requests by learners for teaching in a language medium which cannot be accommodated by schools.

2. In the case of a new school, the governing body of the school in consultation with the relevant provincial authority determines the language policy of the new school in accordance with the regulations promulgated in terms of section 6(1) of the South African Schools Act, 1996.

3. It is reasonably practicable to provide education in a particular language of learning and teaching if at least 40 in Grades 1 to 6 or 35 in Grades 7 to 12 learners in a particular grade request it in a particular school.

4. The provincial department must explore ways and means of sharing scarce human resources. It must also explore ways and means of providing alternative language maintenance programmes in schools and or school districts which cannot be provided with and or offer additional languages of teaching in the home language(s) of learners.

9. FURTHER STEPS

1. Any interested learner, or governing body that is dissatisfied with any decision by the head of the provincial department of education, may appeal to the MEC within a period of 60 days.

2. Any interested learner, or governing body that is dissatisfied with any decision by the MEC, may approach the Pan South African Language Board to give advice on the constitutionality and/or legality of the decision taken, or may dispute the MEC's decision by referring the matter to the Arbitration Foundation of South Africa.

3. A dispute referred to the Arbitration Foundation of South Africa must be finally resolved in accordance with the Rules of the Arbitration Foundation of Southern Africa by an arbitrator or arbitrators appointed by the Foundation.