

Towards a nuanced view of multilingualism

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Multilingualism is a common phenomenon in the world; there are almost no territories in which only one language is used by the citizenry. South Africa is often lauded for giving constitutional recognition to eleven of its languages as official ones. This was an important symbolic step in attempting to validate the languages of the people of South Africa. But we should never forget that actual multilingual practice can be more difficult to pin down. This point was forcefully made in a lively article to the *Mail and Guardian* in 2003 by Simon Donnelly, a linguist and scholar of African languages, regarding the recently completed census. He warned of the dangers of insufficient attention to the statistics of smaller languages and fluid multilingualism, for economic and community development.

The much-vaunted South African multilingualism is far more fluid and extraordinary than these figures reveal. Specifically, the most heterogeneous chunk of the country, with the widest linguistic repertoire, is Gauteng, where nearly nine million people speak ... just about everything.

Because the census asks just this one question, the answer to which is unclear for any of the several million multilingual township residents in Soweto, Sebokeng, Alexandra, and so on, the data that emerges is “flat”: South Africa appears to be neatly chopped up into 11 zones of monolingual speakers. The truth is radically removed from this. First, there are documentable, important subvarieties of several national languages: there are children (importantly, for the purposes of language transmission) speaking Mpondo, Bhaca, Cele and smaller Nguni languages, who are forced to declare themselves arbitrarily as “Xhosa”

or “Zulu”, even where these “dialects” are mutually unintelligible with the standard language.

Second, there are millions of households that are multilingual in English and Afrikaans, or in some combination of Zulu/Xhosa/Sotho/Tsonga/everything else, for whom it is a non-trivial matter to decide whether they feel they speak more Zulu or more Tsonga, more English or more Afrikaans, at home.

When asked by a form-wielding official, guess what? People usually answer with the name of a prestige language, such as Zulu or English. (Donnelly: 2003).

There is also a feeling among many intellectuals that even for the nine main African languages of the early 1990s, the constitutional provisions have not been realised in practice. In the domain of education, especially, the study and use of African languages amongst young people at schools has not flourished, whilst current prescriptions require the acquisition of two languages, which have in practice been English and Afrikaans, and to a lesser extent Zulu (isiZulu) and Xhosa (isiXhosa). At universities, students in the Health Sciences are required to pass an African language, but this is not yet a requirement in other faculties. In fact many scholars feel that as areas of academic study, African languages are in crisis. While issues pertaining to the perceptions of young people and their parents about the status and utility of languages are complex, we wish to explore one aspect that might be missing in current notions of ‘multilingualism’. This aspect concerns the gap between the way multilingualism is actually practised “on the ground” and the way it is conceived of by the guardians of individual languages, in their quest for inculcating the standard variety.

It is important to consider what the term ‘multilingual’ means in relation to the degree of competence in an individual speaker. We need to consider what an individual’s dominant language is, and/or what the heritage language or mother tongue means for a bi/multilingual person. Within this perspective ‘communicative competence’ (the ability to communicate appropriately in a range of contexts) plays a greater role than just ‘book grammar’ – or mastery of the lexicon and formal rules of grammar of the standard form of a language. Such communicative competence resides within

communities of practice, which embed language in discourses for constructing and communicating meaning. Multilingualism has been defined as ‘the capacity to use several languages appropriately and effectively for communication in oral and written language’ (Cenoz & Genesee 1998). Furthermore, the acquisition and use of multiple languages is highly complex because of the interactions that are possible among the languages being learned, especially in terms of cross-linguistic influences and the processes involved. This may include drawing on several languages in order to communicate effectively in a given context (code-switching) – a phenomenon that could also be related to the unequal linguistic balance of each language in a person’s repertoire. Cook (2002) prefers the term ‘multicompetence’ to describe such a phenomenon, and questions whether assessing a person’s language proficiency according to a monolingual, purist norm is relevant in this context.

An idea often taken for granted is the separate existence of South Africa’s 11 official languages. However, it is important that the framers of language-policy should be aware that however necessary their initial concept of eleven distinct national languages may be for official purposes, it is essentially artificial, and a consequence at least in part of South Africa’s peculiar socio-political history, with its recurrent emphasis on ideologies of separateness and correctness, and concomitant monolingual norms regarded as manifestations of purity and prestige. The speech-behaviour that we witness typically when people are left to their own linguistic devices, especially in the urban environments which are increasingly the norm of life in this country, is characterised rather by fluidity, interconnection, multi-competent code-switching and easy transcendence of notional linguistic boundaries. This is true particularly of informal domains. Whilst certain media promote the idea of standard forms of a language, other more popular forms both reflect and help to sustain sociolinguistic reality – e.g. the fluent multilingualism of the popular TV soaps like *Isidingo* and *Sewende Laan*; and African language radio stations that tend to prefer modern, urban, mixed forms to traditional “correct” rural forms.

Applied linguistic work in Africa today is largely a response to the specific conditions that were prevalent under colonialism. Today, the retention and use of the ex-colonial languages in post-colonial Africa, due to the economic power they carry, contradicts the equally powerful need to protect and further develop the indigenous African

languages, especially in the face of rapid globalization and modernization. In South Africa, new work is emerging that explores the process of multilingual acquisition (Rudwick 2005, Deumert 2006). This work is based on the reality of language use in South Africa, which lies on a continuum that ranges from pure monolingualism, to bilingualism, to multilingualism to 'mixed', according to regional context and depending on whether it is urban or rural (Slabbert & Finlayson 2002). Language issues are increasingly being re-evaluated in the light of "Africanist" perspectives. For example, Makoni (1999), following Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) and Harries (e.g. 1995), maintains that the construct of 'indigenous languages' is an arbitrary division of a natural continuum, resulting historically from a colonial, Eurocentric attempt to capture and 'standardise' these languages in the early nineteenth century. He sees the "boxing" of languages in the 19th century as an unrealistic attempt to impose fixity where there was in fact fluidity and flexibility amongst users. Of course, the process of standardisation in Europe, which proved a key part of nation-state development also involved the fixing of norms for formal purposes, amidst the flux of dialect diversity. So it is difficult to agree that some boxing in the process of standardisation is avoidable, and perhaps part of the 'separatist' ideology often underpinning it. It is, nevertheless, important to remember that the standard forms of African languages were fixed in an early nineteenth century mode, first set down and codified by missionaries. This often happened in small rural districts where the missionaries had settled. Further standardisation took place under the Language Boards of the apartheid era.

Mesthrie (2002) therefore raises the question of whether this standardisation of the African languages via the mission presses, sermons and dictionaries may have taken place too early to be effective as a norm representing *present-day* Black social and cultural aspirations. In other words, the people who form the social and intellectual elite are not associated with the rural areas and the "deep" form of African languages. Rather, they are likely to be urbanised, technologically sophisticated, and in vital and close communication with speakers of several other indigenous languages. Hence they have become multilingual code-switchers, with English an essential ingredient of that stratified multilingualism. Moreover, their languages are not static, and refuse to remain in their nineteenth century or (later) apartheid boxes. Urban speech is characterised by interlinguistic borrowings and neologisms; and the growth of mixed

urban codes like Tsotsitaal, which unite the grammar of a base language (Afrikaans or Zulu) with a diverse, and often subversive, vocabulary from different languages.

The biggest challenge facing language professionals in Africa/South Africa today is the interpretation and implementation of national language, and language education policies in ways that lead to African and additional languages being used effectively in order to ensure multilingual, educational, economic and social achievement.

Sociolinguistic and Applied Linguistic research in this context has to deal with complex sociolinguistic profiles and ideologically and logistically complex language issues. Most African societies can be perceived as multilingual, as their populations often speak more than two languages. In many of these societies, however, an ex-colonial language is often used to carry out the official business of the country.

This gap between spoken language practice and written idealisations needs to be bridged for all languages, if we are to make language study attractive and meaningful to schoolchildren. The notion of communicative language teaching tries to do this, as was discussed in the third document on language in the classroom. What we wish to emphasise here is a dynamic approach of communication in context that complements the more static approach needed to inculcate a formal standard for successful academic and technical writing.

A communicative and “anti-purist” approach views code-switching as “good” practice in that it is used to facilitate communication and, in schools and classrooms, to facilitate learning. African teachers have traditionally used the African languages to facilitate learning and understanding for their pupils. This strategic code-switching has multiple functions including explanation and clarification, as well as asserting solidarity and in-group identity. It also supports knowledge transfer as learners build on their cognitive schema. Developing functional categories helps teachers appreciate the value of using a multilingual approach, thereby increasing tolerance for other languages in the classroom. It also serves to disabuse teachers and principals of deficit notions of codes and code-switching (Adendorff 1993; Kunene 1996). Code-switching is quite compatible with developments in Outcomes Based Education with its emphasis on dynamic approaches to the transmission of knowledge and the creation of appropriate learning environments. OBE welcomes new ways of teaching

and learning which challenge prevailing orthodoxies. The challenge for language teachers is to negotiate between code-switching as an oral communicative experience and the more formal norms expected in writing the standard form of a particular language.

Attempts to develop (and standardise) the African languages from a “purist” perspective have included excessive development of terminology in an attempt to coin terms rather than borrow them from another language. The terms created in this way are often unfamiliar and confusing to the end-user. An analysis of existing terminology is thus needed to evaluate its efficiency in the current educational context, coupled with a more participatory approach to language development, i.e. language use “on the ground” as opposed to prescriptive language norms. This points to the need for more corpus development of the African languages in particular domains in order to gain insight into the actual current use of these languages.

To return to the topic of borrowing, it must be recognised that this is a natural linguistic phenomenon: all languages borrow frequently and extensively at different periods of their history. Just as *indaba*, *legkotla* and *imbizo* have made it into South African English, African languages are absorbing words from English for reasons of modern technological reference (*TV*, *cellphone*, *computer*, *DVD*) as well as to signal status. While language loyalists worry that an excess of borrowing eventually paves the way for language shift to the dominant language, it is worth recalling that English itself has adopted thousands of words from different sources for everyday as well as technical communication, integrating them into its phonological and grammatical patterns. It is noticeable too that the process extends not just to ‘content’ words, but to logical connectors (*‘but’*) and discourse markers (*‘I mean’*) too. These are not being done for reasons of linguistic deficit (since African languages do have such words) but for reasons pertaining to status and the restructuring of discourse (Deumert, Mesthrie and Masinyana: in progress). Again it is worth remembering that English has been influenced in the form of some of its logical connectors in earlier periods of its history, including items like *because* and *supposing*.

It is also important not to limit the notion of multilingualism to the official languages. That state language repertoires are not fixed has been made clear by the recent growth

of speakers of languages like Shona (chiShona), Swahili (Kiswahili), (African) French and (African) Portuguese in South Africa. Moreover, there are many local varieties whose identities are often submerged by the eleven that made it. These include Pondo (isiPondo), Bhaca (isiBhaca), Sign Language and so forth, though much has been done to promote Sign. To return to the points raised by Donnelly as cited at the beginning of this paper, it is a matter of concern that the South African censuses of post 1994 have only counted the 11 official languages, lumping all other languages under the anonymous 'Other'. It is therefore currently impossible to obtain census statistics about individual languages that did not attain official status.

In conclusion, we do not wish to downplay the need for formal written standards and NLBs [National Language Bodies] for each language. Decisions related to language norms should be contextualised, in order to adequately reflect the complexity and fluidity of the sociolinguistic situation in South Africa. It is becoming clear that greater cooperation between the various boards is desirable. The four papers in this ENLB series have tried to characterise fundamental aspects of our multilingual situation. The better we understand that situation, the better our chances of framing practicable policies. The alternative would be to end up with an idealised formulation to which everyone pays lip service, but effectively disregards in practice, because it simply does not work.

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