

A Diminished Role of Indigenous African Languages in South African Institutions

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Abstract

This paper sought to dissect the role of indigenous African languages in South African institutions. It attempted to prove and argue, through research, that indigenous African languages are not fully and professionally utilized by the South African institutions. The roles of these languages were interrogated so that their functional viability could be determined. To do that a research was conducted using interviews, observations and questionnaires. Individuals, groups and institutions were sampled to be used as population. An important finding was that indigenous African languages are not functionally viable and are not used optimally by education, financial, business and legal institutions, and even government. The government only uses them as a marketing ploy or gimmick. Conclusions paint a very bleak picture about the functionality and development of indigenous African Languages. Government, business and education still use English instead of indigenous African languages, for debates, business and tuition, respectively.

Keywords: Indigenous African language; Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT); functional viability

Introduction

The paper attempted to investigate the role of indigenous African languages in South African institutions. According to the Language in Education Policy (contained in the South African Schools Act no. 84 of 1996), the new system of education seeks to establish additive multilingualism as an approach to language in education, but it seems some minority indigenous African languages might not survive in the language competition. Currently, English and Afrikaans are the only two of the eleven official languages which are dominant throughout South Africa. The paper looked at the challenges of indigenous African languages, and the diminished role they play in education and other institutions, twenty two (22) years into democracy.

Objective

The objective of the paper was to explore the roles given to indigenous African languages so as to determine their functional viability.

Methodology

Triangulation was used. Mouton and Marais (1990) define triangulation as the use of multiple methods of data collection to increase reliability. This is supported by Buber, Gadner and Richards (2004) by stating that triangulation is the use of parallel studies using different methods to achieve the same purpose. In this study the methods were combined in conducting one research. This was done for both convenience and validity of results. It was also done to 'allow expression of different facets of knowledge' as Mathison (1988), in Buber, Gadner and Richards (2004), puts it. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Qualitative procedure was chosen because a small group could be used and the results would be about patterns and common features.

A report written would be a narrative one focusing on contextual description rather than a statistical report focusing on comparisons of means. Qualitative research is said to be subjective, as opposed to the quantitative, which is objective. Quantitative research could not be ruled out because the study was about existing knowledge and the results (outcomes) would be hypothesized. Since quantitative research is about numbers, we used it to measure the amount, i.e. the number of institutions using English over indigenous African languages.

Mouton (2001) identifies four design types using a four-dimensional framework. These are illustrated in the table, below.

Table 3.1

Dimension	Type
Dimension 1: Ranging from Empirical to non-empirical (conceptual)	Empirical Non empirical
Dimension 2: Primary or new data collected vs analyzing existing data	Primary Secondary Hybrid
Dimension 3: Type of data, ranging from numeric to textual	Numeric Textual Combination
Dimension 4: Degree of control or structured in design	High control Medium control Low control

Source: Mouton

The paper was based on Type 2 model, because it combined both primary and secondary data in summarizing the findings. The research was based on an Inductive Argument because the conclusion is only highly probable and not definitive.

Participants and sampling method

Multilingual communities were the main target because it is where comparison is made in terms of language preferences and usage. The Zululand District Municipality in the province of KwaZulu-Natal was chosen as the population in the study. There are two types of samples that were drawn, i.e. a sample of individuals and a sample of institutions. Samples were in the form of individuals, groups and organizations. Individuals were selected from citizens and students, while groups came in the form of English educators, group of English advisers and classrooms in certain communities. For organizations, corporations, banks and subsections in departments were targeted. Each cluster was selected because of its merits and because of what it represented. Some clusters represented professions rather than communities. When sampling individuals, the focus was on the community the members come from. Age, gender and ethnicity were not considered as defining criteria in this instance. Instead, the number of languages that are spoken by the community was the most important aspect of the selection. The district has three dominant languages, and these are isiZulu, English and Afrikaans.

When sampling groups, the main focus was mainly on composition and purpose. We focused on the individuals that formed the group and also on why the group existed. Some groups would be meeting for a workshop for a specified period (like a weekend) while others would become a group by default, just because of the service they are providing or because of the institution they are registered with, e.g. a sampled group of Mthashana TVET College students or a group of officials stationed in the Teaching and Learning Services offices (subject advisers) in the Zululand Educational District.

Sample 1: Teaching and Learning Services (Zululand District)

The first group of respondents came from the Zululand District Office. Subject advisers working in the district were asked to participate. The group was representative of the most subjects offered in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Two participants speak Afrikaans. One is White and the other Colored. The rest of the participants speak isiZulu. One of the isiZulu speakers is an Afrikaans HL adviser, while another supports English HL teachers since there is no EHL adviser in the district, due to financial constraints and practicality. There are only two schools offering Afrikaans at HL level and four offering English at HL level.

Sample 2: Sisonke EFAL Educators

In another cluster, selected respondents were English First Additional Language educators who were attending a content workshop. The common factor in that group is that they all work in the Sisonke District and come from the southernmost tip of KwaZulu-Natal. The district was once under the Eastern Cape government and was moved to KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province during restructuring and due to new demarcations. The district is, therefore, predominantly isiXhosa speaking and, above all, deep rural. There were 2551 KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) learners registered to write isiXhosa in 2011.

Sample 3: Nongoma

Nongoma is where the Zulu monarch, Isilo Samabandla, King Goodwill Zwelithini, lives. The 'town' is about 55 kilometers from Ulundi and about 110 kilometers from Vryheid. Nongoma people are traditional and isiZulu speaking. The economy of Nongoma is mostly subsistence farming and most of the places are remote. Most people have a secondary education as there are more than sixty (60) high schools and a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college. Respondents were randomly selected in the town of Nongoma and in areas surrounding it.

Sample 4: Haladu

Haladu falls, both politically and educationally, under uMzinyathi District and is a multilingual community populated by both isiZulu and Sesotho speakers. The community is balanced in terms of numbers of speakers of each language. Most learners in the area have a choice to register either isiZulu or Sesotho as their HL. It is unfortunate that the province does not have a large pool of Sesotho educators and relies on other provinces for question papers and marking. Haladu (through Leneha-Tumisi Secondary School) and Nqutu learners are, therefore, the only learners to register and write Sesotho in KwaZulu-Natal. In terms of statistics, there were 41 learners registered to write Sesotho HL in the province in 2011, with 27 learners schooling at Leneha-Tumisi.

Sample 5: Vryheid Community

Vryheid, as a town, is dominated by isiZulu speakers. The population was estimated at around 194469 in 2007, according to Wikipedia. About 63% of that population lives in rural areas. 22% of the population has no formal education, according to Wikipedia.

Sample 6: Institutions

The most important sample of them all was the one about institutions. The focus of the research was on institutions and their practices. As the study was conducted to find out if indigenous African languages are functionally viable and to critically examine their prospects and challenges in the new South Africa, we sought to find out from institutions if they were using indigenous African languages on daily basis.

The intention was to cover as many sectors as possible. We covered sectors like:

- Education** : the Department of Education (DoE) and its language policies and practices
- Political** : political parties and their language policies and practices
- Legal** : Legal Aid Board and the magistrate's court, and their language policies and practices
- Safety and Security**: South African Police Service (SAPS) and their language policies and practices
- Health** : hospitals and clinics and their language policies and practices
- Administration**: municipality and its language policies and practices

Research instruments

There were three main research instruments used. Two of them were questionnaires, while one was an observation instrument designed to record parliamentary discussions.

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were designed for the purpose of this study. One focused on individuals and their thoughts about the subject, while the other focused on institutions. The advantage about using questionnaires was that the respondents could consult with others to confirm information. All the necessary steps and procedures were followed when designing the tool, e.g. a pretest was done and double-barreled questions were avoided.

Questionnaire for individuals

The first questionnaire focused on individuals and communities and their use of languages. The questionnaire could be filled in by the individuals all by themselves. It only addressed the personal preferences of the respondents and also how they see the language use in their areas. Respondents were given forms as individuals or in groups. The questions were about personal experiences of the individual respondents. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections, viz. Sections A, B and C. Section A was for personal details and is was used for statistical purposes only. It required information on age group, gender, level of education and nature of involvement in the study, i.e. is the respondent participating just as a community member or because he/she is a professional involved in teaching of languages?

Section B focused on the 'yes' or 'no'- multiple choice- and open-ended questions. Some of the questions focused on the understanding of the area the respondent lived in. There were questions about the LoLT of the area, lingua franca, dominant language and the HL of the respondent. There were also questions on knowing about or being aware of the policies governing the use of languages in the country. Section C was about Batibo (2005) and his *five phases of language shift and death in Africa*. Respondents were made aware of these phases and were, therefore, asked to identify the stage they thought their community was in. A consolidation sheet was then used to collate data collected per sample. The sheet was mainly for computation as conclusions could only be made by analyzing numbers and responses. There were two different consolidation forms used. A consolidation form for individuals was different from that of the institutions, as the focal points were different.

Questionnaire on institutions and their use of language

The second questionnaire targeted institutions and not individuals and their preferences. The accounting officer at each institution was responsible for answering questions. The answers had to be objective and be based on policies or acts. The focal point was on minutes, language of meeting, communication, documentation and language of teaching (for education departments and universities). This questionnaire focused on functional viability of the languages and the responses were given through using the code of the language in the appropriate space. The conclusions made on this questionnaire informed the researcher on the number of institutions that were contacted and the language preferences in terms of minutes, consultation, documentation, etc. Areas targeted were municipal offices, police stations, schools and universities, district offices, legal aid institutions and law firms. The questionnaire also sought to find out about the language that institutions used for recording minutes. Some meetings deliberate in one language and record minutes in another. This has its own problems because there are always complications in translating resolutions. The questionnaire, therefore, separated language of minutes from language of meeting. Institutions were also asked about the language used when inviting staff to meetings, giving information and also giving instructions to clients. This could be in the form of memoranda, brochures, posters, pamphlets, circulars and prescriptions (for doctors and pharmacists). Some institutions deal with outside clients on daily basis and were asked to respond on their policy on consultation.

Findings

It was found that there is a common trend among all the institutions sampled. All the institutions use English as a language of meeting and minutes. Most samples confirmed to policies being implemented top-down because they are national policies. The highest authority of our country, the parliament, uses English more than it uses all the other official languages combined. When the President delivers his State of the Nation Address (SONA) speech, it is in English, with a few gimmicky sentences used to convince the public that he can reach all of us. Respondents differed in their language preference. Most of them confirmed that they preferred English to other languages. It could be the fact that they knew English is dominant and is a language of mobility. It was a general feeling among respondents that the government was not doing enough to develop indigenous African languages.

Rural communities and monolingualism

English is not dominant in rural communities because, according to Tollefson (1996), English is acquired in schools and people who do not have access to formal education may be unable to learn English. Most adult speakers of a language still speak their home languages without interference of the second language. Because of the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, some speakers use words which are borrowed from Afrikaans. In some areas one discovered that even the pronunciation of certain terms leaned towards Afrikaans.

Transfer of learning also has a role to play when it comes to the younger generation. In some parts of Vryheid people pronounce a borrowed noun 'usisi' (sister) as 'usesi' (from Afrikaans 'sus' which is shortened 'suster'). Most illiterate adult people in the province understand Afrikaans better than they do English. That in itself disqualifies the notion of monolingualism in rural communities. But that does not happen to most communities and can, therefore, be debatable.

Indigenous African languages still have wide speakership

Most indigenous Africans still speak their first languages and feel their languages have a role to play in the development of their country. A very high percentage of the respondents feel that isiZulu (since the study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal) has a role to play in their communities.

The role of the government

Indigenous African languages are not given enough attention. The role played by the government is very minimal in making sure that the languages are promoted. The government itself does not practice what it preaches. It is partly to blame for the underdevelopment of indigenous African languages. The government newsletters, according to Thorpe (2002), are produced in English. She makes an example of the Department of Land Affairs newsletter which is produced in English, but targeting rural communities with limited exposure to English. English is exclusively used by the parliament and other levels of local government. The ruling party's language of choice is not an indigenous African language, but English.

The Afriforum Youth, through its presentation to the Minister of Higher Education, Dr Blade Nzimande, argue that Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start their schooling in a foreign language. They further state that this leads to poor-quality education and the marginalisation of the continent. Using Afriforum Youth's argument, one would like to state that it is 'ironic that developed countries emphasise mother-tongue education, while developing countries, despite their strong views against colonialism, are still under the impression that it is necessary for the sake of "international competitiveness" to study colonial languages' (Afriforum Youth, 2011:8). South Africa's failure to sanction language policies in education is one of the main contributing factors to the underdevelopment of indigenous African languages.

Municipalities should take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents, but it will be impossible to cater for the minorities. If the CBD (business area) is owned and dominated by Afrikaans speakers, does the CBD necessarily need to adopt Afrikaans when 75% of the market is isiZulu speaking? Parastatals and government departments have proven to lean more towards English than IALs. For example, The Postal Services has gone for an English-only website, according to Orman (2008). It is noted that South Africa Airways (SAA) has also dropped the Afrikaans version of its name (Suid-Afrikaanse Lugdiens) in support of South African Airways. According to Mail and Guardian (25/01/2007), as quoted by Orman (2008), the predominantly-Afrikaans province introduced an English only policy for internal communication in the SAPS. There is always a contradiction between policy and application. The Language-in-Education Policy (LiEP) gives an individual the right to choose a language in which they want to be taught, but the country has only two major media of instruction beyond grade 4.

English, and not an African language, is used for political communication

Language has always been a bone of contention and, according to Fair Clough (2001), language is becoming more important in what people do. The oldest political movement in Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), representing the majority of the Black South Africans, could not come up with a clear cut solution to the language problem. That is why during the negotiations it "favoured a *laissez faire* approach" according to Prah (2007:13). That resulted to the emergence of English as a national language. As the ruling party, the ANC makes public statements entirely in English and some of the prominent leaders cannot speak an indigenous African language. One of the offices visited for this research was a Regional Office of one of the political parties in Vryheid. The office administrator confirmed that the regional office records minutes in English and sends out invitations in English. The regional office is not acting on its own, but follows the prescripts of the mother organization. This is consistent with the general ideology of the South African political parties. The ANC regarded English as a language of liberation and a language that would be used to mediate the opposition of Afrikaans-speaking government, according to Heugh, in Mesthrie (2002).

All trade unions hold their meetings in English and also make public statements in English. It does not look like the trade unions have an interest in the language debate. The unions have always raised labour issues, but are not active participants in language issues.

English is still the LoLT in higher education system

KwaZulu-Natal's provincial circular, KZN circular no 31 of 2011, signed by the Acting Head: KZN DoE, states that all learners from Grades 1 shall offer one official language at Home Language level. It further states that a second official language can be offered at a First Additional Language level, but one of these two languages must be the LoLT. The circular also makes provision for a third language only from grades 4 to 12. The circular's provisions only address HL as a level at which the language is taken at school and not as a language that one acquired first at home. The circular must be read in conjunction with the LiEP (1997) and the constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act no 106 of 1996).

All these circulars and policies do not address the issue of multilingualism to the fullest. They leave everything upon the schools and governing bodies to decide on the languages to be used in institutions. According to Heugh, in Mesthrie (2002), the introduction of additive multilingualism (through LiEP announced in 1997) promoted the use of a Home Language alongside the FAL which is English to most learners and that has led to the domination of English. Knowledge production is carried out in either English or Afrikaans, according to Prah (2007). This proves that African languages do not feature in the reproduction of knowledge. The vocabularies used are all in English. Workshops are all conducted in either English or Afrikaans.

This supports the argument that indigenous African languages are not utilised for formal gatherings and professional development and are, therefore, not functionally viable. This has a negative effect because we relegate indigenous African languages to not-so-important events and informal discussions, thus proving that they are not economically viable. This view is supported by Madiba (2012) who cites Mphahlele (2004) in stating that 'indigenous languages are relatively underdeveloped, compared to colonial languages such as French, Portuguese and English, which are already elevated to the position of working tools.'

A democratic right and social choice

The right to speak a language of choice is a prescription of one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, and it seems only to be applicable to certain spheres of the society, because there is always a gap between the intended policy and the action. The Bill of Rights states that; '*Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice*', but there are limitations to that because one cannot use a language that would not market him at the end of the day.

African languages have been relegated to the lower levels of communication and can only be used for petty conversations and some religious and cultural events. Prah (2007:22) associates that with oppression, and states that; "At least three-quarters of the South African population are made up of African language-speaking people whose histories and cultures are coterminous with those of all the neighbouring countries." White dominance and repression have submerged this African character of the society, and through the operation of an economic system which involves all, but in which again Africans are kept at the bottom of the heap. Thus, the cultural and linguistic oppression of Africans in South Africa, which affects Africans more profoundly than any other group in the country, is paralleled by an economic structure of subordination."

Indigenous African languages are not functionally viable

Makoni, in Prah (2007:20), sums the whole argument pretty well in stating that "English, French and Portuguese are languages of power, modernity, school, government and officialdom, while African languages dominate the domestic domain, primary groups and primordial solidarities." This notion is further supported by Heugh, in Mesthrie (2002), by stating that indigenous African languages were never intended for use in the upper levels of education, the economy and political activity. Klu *et al.* (2013), in presenting arguments justifying the use of non-indigenous African languages, states that non-indigenous African languages serve as a unifying factor on top of the fact that indigenous African languages lack the scientific and technological lexicons. They further argue that indigenous African languages lack orthographies that could be used for effective communication. In one comedy on TV (*Going Up*) xiTsonga is portrayed as a tangential language with people using descriptions instead of single words, e.g. '*lokomunhuangarikona*' (absent) and '*tekanchumu wo karhi u wuendlawawena*' (adopt).

There is also a perception, according to Turner (2012), that indigenous African languages are ‘exceptionally’ difficult and people, therefore, take them as additional languages. The findings have proven that indigenous African languages are not functionally viable and they are nowhere near achieving the same status as English and Afrikaans.

One can further state that:

- South African government’s failure to sanction language policies is the cause of underdevelopment of indigenous African languages. There are very good policies and, as Prah (2007:15) puts it, “Most observers who have looked at the issue of language policy in Africa are agreed about the fact that there is a big gap between intended policy (planned or espoused) and action or implementation”.
- Identity has a role to play in the indigenous African languages development and/or underdevelopment. Mkhonza (2009) gives reasons why newspapers that are in siSwati have a problem in Swaziland. The attitude of the Swazis has an influence because there is a lack of interest in reporting in siSwati. Swazis themselves look down upon assignments that require writing in siSwati. This is very interesting because some Swazis cannot read English but all siSwati newspapers do not do well in Swaziland. In the Zululand District the most prominent newspapers are *Paulpietersburg Advertiser*, *Vryheid Herald*, *Zululand Observer*, *New Age* and *The Witness*. It is even more interesting to note that *Sowetan* is the most dominant of all the newspapers read in the district. All these newspapers are written in non-indigenous African languages.
- Determining, according to respondents, the stage South Africa is in in terms of Batibo’s (2005:89-92) *phases of language shift and death in Africa* is difficult because it is relative. One can only look at the community in isolation to determine that.

Concluding reflections

The findings of the paper have revealed that indigenous African languages still enjoy a wide speakership, and that a very high percentage of the respondents felt that isiZulu (since the study was conducted in KwaZulu-Natal) has a role to play in their communities. This includes all spheres of life, including in education, in commerce, in government, etc. Unfortunately, the role played by the government is very minimal in making sure that the languages are used optimally to benefit everyone who prefers to access services through these media, and also those who choose to be taught through the media of indigenous African languages. As argued above, it is ironic that developed countries emphasise mother-tongue education, while developing countries, despite their strong views against colonialism, are still under the impression that it is necessary for the sake of “international competitiveness” to study colonial languages.

The paper does not advocate the promotion of indigenous African languages at the expense of English or Afrikaans, but the development of the languages to the point where there is parity of esteem between official indigenous languages on the one hand, and English and Afrikaans, on the other hand. This, it is hoped, would ensure that there is meaningful production of knowledge in indigenous African languages, which would benefit all the language users who, clearly, would find it easier to consume knowledge without any language barriers, particularly, those who are not competent in English and/or Afrikaans.

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