

## The last word

# Overcoming the language barrier

## Neville Alexander

In South Africa, a plethora of factors — historical, political, economic, social, geographic and demographic — makes difficult, and often impossible, easy communication among groups of people who, for better or for worse, live in one country, one economy, one society, one polity. The purpose of this short note is not to discuss the reasons for this complex phenomenon with which we are confronted, nor to suggest any “game plans” out of the maze — there are in any case too many of these facile “scenarios” about!

It is a much more modest project, viz., to draw attention to an aspect of the communications barrier, which is fundamental to our society but which is at the same time one that all of us are in fact able to begin to address immediately. I refer to the language barrier with all its social, political, cultural and economic implications.

In a forthcoming book entitled *Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania*, I have tried to raise some of the more important issues around this problem. The central question is whether it is possible for us to turn the languages we speak in South Africa into “a resource”, instead of allowing them to remain “a problem”. (I am indebted to Dr. Theo Du Plessis for suggesting this way of posing the question). Or, to put it slightly differently: is it possible to transform our languages into instruments of unification instead of letting them continue to be instruments of division as they have been in large part during the past eighty years or so?

We have a bitter heritage of suppression of language rights in South Africa, beginning in earliest colonial times when the Dutch East India Company generally discouraged the use of Malayo-Portuguese and other languages and insisted that the indigenous people learn Dutch. Under British rule, even though there was more tolerance towards the indigenous languages, there was very little active encouragement of those languages on the part of successive colonial governments. Development that did take place in regard to the expansion of literacy in the Nguni-Sotho languages was largely



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initiated by missionaries and sustained by the “mission elite”. the struggle between British imperialism and the nascent Afrikaner middle class in the “Century of Wrong” was reflected in the field of language policy in the bitter battles around the rights of Dutch (later Afrikaans) as against the preferential treatment of English.

The climax of this struggle was, of course, reached in Milner’s aggressive anglicisation policy which led directly to the establishment of Christian-National, mother-tongue schools. After Union, a fairly flexible neo-colonial policy of official English/Dutch (later Afrikaans) bilingualism was implemented. English, of course, retained its most-favoured language status but no serious friction on purely language issues surfaced.

When, in 1948, the National Party came to power, the language issue — as in all other aspects of South African life — was driven to the point of polarisation. In this bird’s-eye survey, there is no need to describe NP language policy in detail especially since it remains to a large extent the stuff of educational politics even today.

However, the deliberate attempts to bring about a binary equality between English and Afrikaans — a policy that amounted to *de facto* Afrikanerisation of South African life — and to cement the dialectal differences between mutually intelligible varieties of Nguni and Sotho in line with the general policy of retribalisation (or ethnic differentiation in the more polite parlance of the powers that be) inevitably ground to a catastrophic halt in the Soweto Uprising of 1976.

What has happened since then is that Afrikaans as a medium of instruction has been all but eliminated from the formal schools of people classified Black. Among mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans, a struggle has emerged between the *hand-hawers*, who want to maintain the most-favoured status of *Algemeen Beskaafde Afrikaans*, and the *alternatiewes*, who want to de-link the Afrikaans language from Afrikanerdom and from Afrikaner nationalism. Some Afrikaans-speaking whites fear — without any foundation, let me add — for the very survival of the language. A peripetia of truly Grecian dimensions!

These are mere skirmishes, however. The real battles are going to be fought between those who are insisting that we have to take the total language situation into account against the background of a rapid movement towards the goal of a post-apartheid South Africa/Azania, on the one hand, and

those, on the other hand, who merely wish to tinker with existing language policies in order to accommodate on a selective basis some of the more urgent and more undeniable demands of the majority of our people.

Many scenarios are possible and feasible, but not all of them are consonant with our ideal of a non-racial, democratic South Africa/Azania. This is an important consideration since what we do between now and then will obviously be informed by what kind of South Africa we want to achieve on the other side of apartheid. What some of us (eg., in the National Language Project) believe to be possible is that *via* a process of as wide-ranging a debate and discussions among hundreds of interested and relevant groups and organisations in South Africa (and some outside), we shall be able to gain consensus on the optimal language policy for the promotion of a national unity in a democratic, non-racial South Africa/Azania.

It is clear to us that any solutions based on ideas of a monolingual South Africa or on the present neo-colonial bilingualism are doomed to failure and will merely catapult us into ethnic conflicts of unprecedented violence. We are convinced that our future is a multilingual one and that only a consistently democratic language policy will avert these dangers. Hence, the NLP has formulated the following tentative proposals:

### **NLP Policy**

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

While it is the policy of the NLP to promote the notion of English as a lingua franca/linking language, it is also the policy of the NLP to promote all the languages of South Africa. People need to be able to communicate with one another through the languages spoken in the region in which they live. So, for, example, if one lives in Natal, one needs to communicate through English and Zulu. If one lives in the Western Cape, however, one needs to converse through the media of Afrikaans, English and Xhosa. Consequently, we believe that the groundwork for providing useful language courses and tutor-training programmes which are specifically geared toward a directly communicative approach should be undertaken without delay. Furthermore, we also believe that since we are

working toward the democratisation of language, the variety of language taught (i.e., standard or dialect) should depend upon the wishes/needs of those concerned. The NLP does not advocate the spread of elitist varieties of language. The fundamental aim is effective communication.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Evidence of the position of the indigenous languages in other African countries reveals that after the initial period of independence and a reliance upon the language of the ex-colonial power, greater significance is attached to the former. Writers, for example, have shifted from writing through the medium of the colonial language to the medium

of their own mother-tongues. The NLP regards this movement as significant and anticipates greater importance being attached to the other languages of South Africa in the future.

Since these proposals involve, among many other things, the way in which we conceptualise the new nation, it is only to be expected that the debate in future will be a heated one. Already, for example, some Afrikaner academics who are otherwise sympathetically inclined to the basic concept of the NLP are questioning whether indeed the status of English (and, conversely, of Afrikaans) needs to be or will be altered as suggested in the NLP proposals.

Others again are extremely apprehensive about the extent to which proposals such as those of the NLP entail language planning — where language planning is misconceived as abstract or ivory-tower manipulation of the voiceless “masses”. Similar concern is felt by academics who are involved in the teaching of African languages, especially in regard to the proposal that the varieties of Nguni and Sotho respectively be standardised into two large written languages.

Vested interests of all kinds are going to be shaken loose by the battles to come. For the sake of avoiding the kinds of battles that are now being waged in countries such as Sri Lanka, or the inherent instability of situations such as that in Belgium, I believe that it is essential that we enter into this debate immediately.

It is one that cannot be avoided, simply because the passing of apartheid and all its attendant neo-colonial policies necessitates discussions on policies appropriate for the post-apartheid era and for a non-racial democratic dispensation. The debate over language policy will be a crucial one. The main provisos are that all those who would participate in this debate should do so with integrity, with a sense of responsibility and at all times with meticulous attention to the empirical reality.