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# Do Language Policies in South Africa Symbolically Erase Multilingualism?

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# **THE STANDARDISATION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES**

## **LANGUAGE POLITICAL REALITIES**

CENTREPOL AND IFAS

PROCEEDINGS OF A CENTREPOL WORKSHOP HELD  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA ON MARCH 29,  
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chapter two

Do language  
policies  
in South Africa  
symbolically  
erase  
multilingualism?

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the worthy aims of protecting and supporting the use of previously disadvantaged languages and using language to promote both unity and diversity in the new South Africa, close scrutiny reveals that the language policies of the new government, and the concepts that buttress them, serve instead to symbolically erase fundamental social realities in contemporary South African society.

This essay examines the relationship of national language policies to ground-level language practices. The language repertoires and actual speech behaviours of people living in a township in North West Province are contrasted with the language policies in their schools. To the extent that the official language policies do not reflect the lived realities of people in this region, I ask what assumptions about language, ethnicity and nationhood underpin these policies and enable people to “make sense” of the gap between language policy and language practice. I employ the semiotic concept of “erasure” to theorize the ideological process that takes place when certain dominant ideas, through their implicit assumptions and discursive force, render invisible particular social phenomena, including speech behaviour.

One of the most important (and one of the least interrogated) ideas that have formed the ideological basis for a great number of policies (language and otherwise) in South Africa over the years is that of unitary and bounded languages/cultures/territories. This idea, rooted strongly in the German Romanticism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, came to South Africa with the European missionaries who began arriving in South Africa in large numbers in the early nineteenth century (Fabian 1986, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). This school of thought is centered on the idea that a “nation” or “race” of people is indivisible from its language and territory (Herder 1766), and that an individual carries the whole of his/her culture, language, and national essence within him/her (von Humboldt 1988). Thus the Xhosa and the Zulu, while speaking closely related languages, were considered separate peoples, as well as the Sotho and Tswana, whose regional dialects, it can be argued, form a single continuum rather than two distinct language groups (Janson and Tsonope 1991, Willan 1996). Although Herder’s influential writings did not envision ethnolinguistic boundaries as the grounds for

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an abridged version of a previously published book chapter that addresses the same question, “Language policies and the erasure of multilingualism in South Africa” in Maria Achino-Loeb, ed 2006, *Silence, The Currency of Power*, Berghahn Books.

political nationalism, his ideas have been deployed, consciously or not, in the service of this cause (Tambiah 1996). His idea that a group's memory, culture, and history are all of a piece led the way to anti-Enlightenment projects such as the Afrikaner volkstad premised on the need to preserve the unity and purity of "the nation" by all means possible (Templin 1984, Moodie 1975).

### LANGUAGE PRACTICES IN TLHABANE TOWNSHIP

Before looking at specific language policies in education and broadcasting, it is important to have a sense of people's everyday language behaviour. The contrasts between how people communicate using language, and the assumptions about language embedded in the official language policies will provide the basis for discussion for the remainder of the chapter.

Near the town of Rustenburg lies Tlhabane, a black township built as a labour reserve in the mid 1900s. Tlhabane is a typical example of the ethnically and racially segregated reserves that the apartheid regime built to serve the labour needs of nearby white-owned farms, industry, and residential areas. Although the inhabitants of Tlhabane are mostly ethnic Tswanas, there are also many Xhosas, Zulus, Shangaans, Sothos, Pedis, and people from neighbouring countries who migrate to this region to find work in the nearby platinum and chrome mines. Socio-economically diverse, as well as ethnically heterogeneous, Tlhabane has affluent neighbourhoods where the homes have two car garages and swimming pools, as well as desperately poor homes where the residents live in crowded and squalid conditions.

Although it is located in the heart of historically Setswana-speaking territory, Tlhabane has always been a place where a range of languages has been used. In the 1950s, Breutz reported, "*the vernacular in the location is the Native language, mainly Setswana, although most of the Natives know some Afrikaans or English*" (Breutz 1953: p. 48-9). Most of the individuals interviewed in the course of my research command an even broader range of languages<sup>2</sup>.

What all of these people I interviewed share is native fluency in Setswana, while the other languages in their individual repertoires are the result of their personal histories and

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<sup>2</sup> Data for this study was gathered in 1996 and 1997. Follow-up research has revealed that the conclusions presented here still apply.

circumstances. In general, few blacks in North West speak fewer than three languages, and most have a passive understanding of two or three more. This is true of men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and to a lesser extent, both urban and rural dwellers.

This degree of multilingualism is not uncommon among black South Africans, or, indeed, among Africans on many parts of the continent. The legacy of colonialism, the phenomena of language contact, the institution of labour migration, urbanization, and, in SA, the politics of racial segregation have all contributed to people's extensive linguistic repertoires. Many people find themselves using one language variety at home, another one (or two) in school, a lingua franca designed for communication among people of different ethnic and national origins in the mines (Fanakalo—see Adendorff 1995), and yet another speech form in their social interactions with their peers. It is therefore not uncommon for people in Tlhabane to use three or four different languages in the course of a single day.

In addition to the prevalence of multilingualism in this region, however, is the fact of widespread multidialectalism, or the command of more than one dialect of a language. In a context such as Tlhabane, it is tempting to take people's shared identity as Setswana speakers for granted and focus instead on the variation in their knowledge of different "languages," e.g., English, Afrikaans, Zulu, etc. In fact, however, very few people ever use standard Setswana at all. Instead, they use a complex array of non-standard forms of Setswana that not only reflect the current political, economic, and cultural realities in urban South Africa, but that are also deployed in strategic ways to shape them.

The variety of Setswana that people speak differs from the standard dialect mostly in its lexicon. "Street Setswana" incorporates lexical items from a wide range of other languages, including English, Afrikaans, Zulu, and Tsotsitaal (Cook 1999). Better described as a range of styles than as a single language or dialect (i.e., a well defined and bounded code with a unique grammar, morphophonemic system, and lexicon), varieties of Street Setswana are all linked by the fact that they index the speaker's urbanness, an important part of people's identity as modern South Africans (Cook 2002, see also Spitulnik 1998).

In addition to Street Setswana, there are also regional dialects of Setswana that vary significantly from the standard variety. Most Setswana speakers understand and speak Sesotho and Sepedi. These three languages are considered distinct languages rather than closely related dialects only because of the pre-colonial politics of European missionization. Nevertheless, they have been codified as separate languages for at least one hundred and fifty years.

As with Setswana, there are numerous dialects of Afrikaans, Zulu, Sesotho and English spoken and/or heard in North West Province (Slabbert and Finlayson 2000). Not only are people multidialectal with regard to their “mother tongue,” Setswana, but they also command different dialects of the other languages in their repertoires.

The typical residents of Tlhabane township are multilingual and multidialectal speakers. And each one of them has a sophisticated understanding of the social salience attached to using different styles of Street Setswana, to codeswitching between Setswana and English, and to incorporating lexical items from Afrikaans, Zulu, and Pedi into their speech, and that all of them deploy these interactional strategies on a daily basis. Although unremarkable in the lives of these people, these language behaviours seem quite remarkable in light of the language curriculum being taught in Tlhabane’s schools.

### LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

Although the South African Constitution enshrines eleven official languages on a national level, what does this mean for language instruction in primary schools in Tlhabane? How does the current curriculum depart from the apartheid system that had children learning via the medium of their “home” language in primary school, but then switching to a mandatory 50/50 split between Afrikaans and English in secondary school, with Setswana reduced to a discipline?

Because Tlhabane was previously part of the Tswana “bantustan,” government schools in and around Tlhabane abandoned the apartheid curriculum long before the new Constitution was written. As a self-governing homeland under apartheid legislation, Bophuthatswana had its own Department of Education, and was able to shift away from the apartheid regime’s approach to the language of instruction back in the 1970s. This does not mean, as one might expect, that Bophuthatswana schools emphasized Setswana through high school, when the apartheid regime was enforcing the teaching of English and Afrikaans. Rather, English medium instruction was gradually introduced into the curriculum earlier and earlier, until by 1977, students studied Setswana as a subject until the end of secondary school, whereas all academic subjects were taught in English from Grade Four (Bophuthatswana Department of Education 1977). This was due to popular pressure, in Bophuthatswana as elsewhere, from students and their parents to provide earlier access to English so that they might have a real chance to become proficient in the language of economic advancement. This system, as well as

the pedagogical methods used to implement it, is still in place in ex-Bophuthatswana. In fact, since the fall of the Bophuthatswana regime in 1994, it has been exported to the areas of North West Province that were not part of the Tswana “bantustan.” In effect, then, the language policies in the “homeland” schools had already departed from apartheid policies by the time the new Constitution came into being, and the language situation in the schools has changed very little since 1994. Circa 1997, schools in Tlhabane still taught English, Afrikaans, and Setswana in the same proportions as before. Children in Tlhabane attend six years of primary school, three years of middle school, and three years of high school. When children enter the first grade (usually at age six or seven), they are taught exclusively in Setswana, presumed to be the “home language” for most. English is introduced unsystematically in the first grade, and then more formally in the second year. Afrikaans is introduced as a subject in the third grade, and by the fourth grade, most subjects are taught via the medium of English. Setswana remains a mandatory subject through grade twelve.

On an ideological level, then, the language policies in Tlhabane’s schools anticipated the Constitution Founding Provision Six (even as they hearken back to the apartheid era) in two important ways. First is the assumption that Setswana speakers don’t (or don’t need to) speak other African languages, and second, that there is only one legitimate form of Setswana. Thus, the language teachers in Tlhabane’s schools actively police the boundaries between Setswana and other languages, as well as between “proper Setswana” and the forms they consider corrupt and inferior. In addition, given that most adults don’t use standard Setswana in their everyday interactions, children from Tswana-speaking homes usually require remedial instruction in the standard form of the language. Students enter school not only with simplified grammar and limited vocabulary--a normal stage of language acquisition--but with a lot of non-standard words that teachers seek to excise from their vocabulary. These range from words that are standard in “another” black South African language to words that are borrowed into Setswana from English and Afrikaans and “Setswanalized.” Some examples of the “foreign” words I heard being banned from Setswana classrooms are:

WORD (LANG. OF ORIGIN)	ENGLISH GLOSS	STANDARD SETSWANA
<i>etsa</i> (Sotho)	do	<i>dira</i>
<i>mama/papa</i> (Afrikaans/Sotho)	mother/father	<i>mme/rre</i>
<i>konomaka</i> (Afrikaans)	clean	<i>phepafatsa</i>
<i>kamore</i> (Afrikaans)	room	<i>phaposi</i>
<i>distories</i> (English)	stories	<i>dikgang</i>
<i>Krismas</i> (English)	Christmas	<i>Botsalo jwa Morena</i>
<i>dikwatlele</i> (Afrikaans)	dishes	<i>dijana</i>

Most of these words are only considered “foreign” by language purists. Setswana teachers not only label these words “incorrect,” but also feel they symbolize a dangerous trend towards abandoning or contaminating Setswana culture and identity (Kotze 2000). As teachers of “pure” Setswana, these professionals thus see themselves as ethnic nationalists fighting for the survival of their culture and identity.

While Setswana teachers do not readily acknowledge that standard Setswana is not the only form of spoken Setswana, they do so implicitly by calling this variety “pure Setswana” or “clean Setswana” (*Setswana se se phepa*, *Setswana se se tlhapileng*). Thus, the state-sponsored version of Setswana is considered not only linguistically correct, but also morally superior to other varieties. The need to distinguish between “pure Setswana” and some other (unnamed) variety is best exemplified in the Setswana portion of the national matriculation exam. Since at least 1994, the Department of Education has included a section on the test where students must provide the “pure Setswana” equivalents for a number of terms.

In 1996, this section read as follows:

*Kwala mafoko a a latelang ka Setswana se se phepa* (Write the following words in pure Setswana):

*Silabase* (“syllabus” from English)  
*Sepitikopo* (“speed cop” from English)  
*Tshampione* (“champion” from English)  
*Ripoto* (“report” from English)  
*Sepatshe* (“wallet” from Afrikaans)

There are several striking points to make about the language policies in Tlhabane schools. First, and most obvious, is the fact that little has changed since 1994. If language is seen as one of the tools of democratization and making restitution for the evils of apartheid, it is unclear how the Ministry of Education, which is in charge of language policies in schools, intends to approach those tasks. Second, the teaching of Setswana, English, and Afrikaans perpetuates a system in which Setswana is considered the “home language” and English and Afrikaans are taught as “languages of wider communication.” Although we saw above that many Setswana speakers also command two or three other “historically disadvantaged” South African languages, this is clearly not the result of having learned them in school. Finally, the school language policies overlook the issue of multidialectalism altogether. Standard Setswana, despite its lack of any real application in everyday life, is taught as though it were the only variety of Setswana. Urban varieties and even more “respectable” regional varieties are derided, corrected, and marked “wrong” on national exams.

The rationale for this configuration of language subjects and media of instruction in the schools in the North West is the presumption that most students speak Setswana as their home language, that they need (and want) competence in English for social and economic reasons, and that Afrikaans still plays a significant (if unpopular) role in the region's economy. Many teachers speak of "phasing out" Afrikaans gradually, but they are aware of the strong sensitivities surrounding this issue.

What is the effect, then, of a language curriculum that presumes a population of ethnic Tswanas who 1) speak a single, standard dialect of Setswana as their home language, 2) require English as a vehicle for participating in the national and international economy, 3) must endure obligatory Afrikaans lessons because "the language of apartheid" still has a role to play in the region, and 4) do not need to speak other African languages? In a community of multilingual and multidialectal individuals who have very little practical use for the standard version of their "mother tongue," these policies serve to symbolically silence the realities of their lives. Policing the boundary between standard Setswana and Street Setswana through admonishment, correction, and testing may reinforce people's attitudes that standard Setswana is an important symbol of their ethnic identity, but it does not change the way they communicate outside the classroom. Similarly, failing to offer instruction in Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, or Tsonga to students in the North West may enable Tswana students to maintain their allegiance to a form of ethnolinguistic nationalism based on chauvinistic notions of separatism and superiority, but it does not change the importance or status of these other languages in people's everyday behaviour or attitudes.

Susan Gal and Judith Irvine define "erasure" as "*the process in which ideology, in simplifying the field of linguistic practices, renders some persons or activities or sociolinguistic phenomena invisible*" (Gal and Irvine 1995). By this process of erasure, then—the ideological eclipsing of certain realities—the language ideologies that dominate official policy making, in particular the one culture/one language idea, obscure the dynamic multilingualism and multidialectalism that characterize the speech behaviors in this region. Gal and Irvine point out that erasure on the level of representation does not necessarily mean the "*actual eradication of the awkward element,*" i.e. the behaviour or phenomenon that doesn't fit into the official picture. This only becomes an issue when the "problematic" behaviour becomes integral to some alternative ideology that might challenge the dominant notion of how things are/should be. For the time being in North West Province, the ideological erasure of individual multilingualism and multidialectalism does not seem to have much of a direct impact on people's behaviour. On the other hand, it does provide the logic for policies that emphasize diversity (separateness) at the expense of unity (oneness), and rationalizes the allocation of resources based on an inaccurate picture of the linguistic repertoires that children bring to the classroom.

Language policy makers are not unaware of these contradictions, but seem powerless to address them. Makena E. Makapan, “Chief Language Practitioner” for Setswana in the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology circa 1997 acknowledged the challenges faced by those in language planning fields who are charged with promoting varieties such as standard Setswana that are not necessarily the prevalent forms<sup>3</sup>. I asked him whether he thinks it is true that standard Setswana is dying out. He said yes, but added that the responsibility lies with parents, teachers, and government people to ensure that it doesn’t, lest people lose their culture and identity. This may suggest some perception of an ideological threat to the idea of ethnolinguistic nationalism. I noted that many Tswana-speaking parents choose to send their children to English-medium schools because they want their children to be able to compete for jobs. Makapan agreed, but said that learning English doesn’t have to mean forgetting Setswana, by which of course he means the standard dialect. Those on the front lines of the battle for linguistic and cultural purity (e.g. Setswana teachers) also appreciate the contradictions inherent in their work. Upwardly mobile educators send their children to English-medium schools, and wouldn’t be caught dead using standard Setswana in their verbal interactions, preferring instead to use English or Street Setswana to index their modern, urban South Africanness. These are the very people trying to ensure that students appreciate the “proper” form of their mother tongue, standard Setswana. Meanwhile, English is competing for people’s allegiance as the language of economic mobility; Afrikaans still plays a surprisingly important role in black popular culture and certain economic spheres; and Street Setswana is the everyday speech form of choice for most Tswanas. So while multilingualism and multidialectalism are being “erased” at the official level, they are thriving on the level of practice.

## CONCLUSION

In practice the vast majority of black South Africans are both multilingual and multidialectal. Ethnic Tswanas in the North West Province are but one example of a socially and historically constructed grouping that is emblemized by the “pure” form of the language they are presumed to speak. Although the notion of linguistic, cultural and territorial unity has its roots in 18th century Europe, it remains as powerful today as it was when it provided the logic for the establishment of the bantustans during the apartheid era. The prevalence and hegemonic nature of this idea is obvious in Founding Provision Six of the new Constitution. The celebrated document that boasts radical new freedoms and protections

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Makapan on August 11, 1997

for South Africans of every racial, religious, sexual, and geographic community establishes eleven official languages (hence ethnic groupings) based on the same understanding of the relationship of linguistic practice to social and cultural belief that has been around for over two hundred years. What gets “erased” are the very realities that distinguish life in South Africa for most blacks today. Their verbal interactions are governed not by the standard form of their “own” ethnic languages, but by the stylistic and strategic deployment of numerous language varieties. Explained away by language purists as “laziness” or the result of too much contact with “foreigners,” the prevalence of individual multilingualism and multidialectalism may not constitute an immediate threat to those in power who would prefer to maintain the conventional “cultural map” of South Africa. But if a vision of South African unity based on pan-urban experience, or trans-ethnic identity were to take hold (as some expected it to under the leadership of the ANC), such behaviours might be increasingly scrutinized and vilified as a threat to the moral and philosophical foundations of the South African nation. Semiotic erasure would turn into practical action to address the “problem,” and a great many South Africans would be surprised to learn that their everyday speech patterns have “suddenly” become a threat to the age old myth of homogenous, bounded ethnic groups.

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