Overview of Issues at Stake

Vic Webb

The Standardisation of African Languages

Language political realities

CentRePoL and IFAS

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chapter one

Overview
of issues at stake

Vic Webb, CentRePol,UP

The research project *The Standardisation of African Languages in South Africa* began in July, 2005, with a three-day workshop involving eight of the National Language Bodies[1] responsible for the Bantu[2] languages[3]. The workshop had the financial and administrative support of the Pan-South African Language Board (PanSALB). The papers presented at the workshop were published later in 2005 in PanSALB's Occasional Papers (Webb et al, 2005).

In March 2007, a second workshop took place. The papers delivered at that workshop form the basis of this publication. A third workshop is being planned for 2008.

The standardisation project forms part of a larger venture of *CentRePoL*, viz. to contribute to the promotion of the minoritised[4] official languages of South Africa and the establishment of multilingualism as a meaningful reality in the country.

The project is based on the concept of *fully-fledged standard language*, and its aim is to contribute towards the development and promotion of the South African Bantu languages into fully-fledged standard languages.

The nine official Bantu languages of South Africa, as we are all aware, have all been standardised to a significant extent, and there are clear norms for writers to follow. However, we also know that these standardised varieties have not been *generally accepted in all high-function contexts*, in particular in schools, that learners (and probably even teachers) do not know these varieties effectively (that is, they do not have the required communicative

1 The Setswana National Language Body declined an invitation to participate

2 The term *Bantu* languages is used because it is the correct technical name for this family of languages, and is the term professionally used outside South Africa Since this publication is mainly directed at an international reader audience, this is the term that will be used in this chapter In South Africa, the concept is stigmatised due to the association of the term Bantu with racism In local language discussions the term *Bantu languages* is thus avoided, and the term *African languages* is used

3 The NLBs for Afrikaans, English, the Khoesan languages and SA Sign languages participated of their own accord

4 The term *minoritised language* must obviously be distinguished from the terms *minority language* (such as French, German, Gujerati, Hindi and Shona in South Africa) and *minor language* (such as Venda and Swati in relation to the other national official languages of South Africa). A minoritised language is an official language which has been denied its status in terms of "equity" and "parity of esteem" as a result of the covert or overt actions of powerful socio-economic and cultural forces

competency in them) and that they are consequently not used effectively. That is: although considerable corpus development has been undertaken, status, acquisition and usage development still needs to take place to the required extent. As evidence of this, one can take note of the disagreements at the 2005 workshop about the relative roles of rural and urban varieties of the Bantu languages and the degree to which urban ways of speaking (for example Zulu in Soweto) should receive recognition as part of the standard.

The March 2007 workshop was designed on the basis of the argument that language development and promotion (including its standardisation) can not be undertaken if it is not clear what the (socio-) linguistic realities pertaining to each language are. In order to undertake language development it is essential to know as precisely as possible what the current state of a language is regarding its linguistic capacity; its social meaning for the community and for persons outside the community; the competence of first-language speakers of the language in the standard variety and their use of it. Given that knowledge, and given a proper understanding of standardisation and its processes, it is possible to undertake corpus development, status development, prestige development, acquisition development and usage development. The objective of the second workshop was thus to contribute towards determining these realities.

The following topics were dealt with:

Linguistic realities in Tshwane schools
Technical terminology in experimental bilingual Grade 12 exam papers
Literacy and the Bantu languages
Standard varieties, urban vernaculars and identity in African language communities
The language of instruction issue

In addition to these issues, the workshop also sought information on language development agencies in South Africa. These agencies are mainly the following: the National Language Service in the Department of Arts and Culture, the Language Research and Development Centres (LRDCs), and PanSALB (NLBs, PLCs and the Lexicography Units).[5]

The following questions were asked of these agencies:

What are their functions and tasks?
How do they operate?

5 Not included in the workshop, but obviously of importance, are other governmental organisations (such as the bodies responsible for translation and interpretation at national, provincial and local levels of government), statutory institutions tasked with quality control (such as Umalusi), language academies (e g for Setswana), private language agencies (e g Afrophone Translation and Interpreting Services), language associations (such as ALASA and Afrilex), non-governmental organisations (such as Project Literacy and Read), language practitioners (also, for example, in private financial institutions) and language watchdogs in the publishing industry (editors) and the print and electronic media.

How are they structured?
How are they composed – what is their membership?
What products / outcomes have they produced?
Have they proved to be effective?
Is there sufficient co-operation between the different agencies in the interests of the common goal?

In addition, a contribution was made about international and continental language development agencies (from Unesco to Acalan).

The third workshop, being planned for September 2008, is intended to deal with *The standardisation of African languages* and their use in education. The workshop will be presented by PanSALB, and it is hoped that the Department of Arts and Culture, the Department of Education and Umalusi will also participate.[6]

Topics envisaged to be discussed include the following:

(a) Tasks in the standardisation of the Bantu languages as fully-fledged educational languages, with reference to matters such as:
  (i) Orthography and spelling
  (ii) Scientific terminology
  (iii) Tension between rural and urban forms of language (with particular reference to the linguistic realities in urban classrooms, in which urban vernaculars such as Pretoria Sotho seem to be used frequently – as demonstrated in one of *CentRePoL*'s research projects)
  (iv) The production of educational material: normative grammars, dictionaries and literature for study purposes
(b) The production of literary work in the Bantu languages
(c) The use of Bantu languages as media of instruction for grades higher than 3 or 4 (possibly in the context of bilingual education in a dual medium system or a parallel medium system)
(d) The appropriate language norms for assessment in Grade 12 examinations

It is hoped that the proposed workshop will contribute substantially to PanSALB's central task: the promotion of the official languages of South Africa, in particular the former disadvantaged languages, and thus to the gradual establishment of equity and parity of esteem between the 11 official languages, that is: the meaningful linguistic transformation of South Africa.

6 The scientific co-ordination of the workshop is being managed by Prof. Vic Webb of *CentRePoL*, and Dr Michel Lafon of Llacan-IFAS

Given the focus of the project, some remarks about standard languages and their role in the public life of their speech communities are necessary.

Firstly, one has to deal with the question why the Bantu languages should be developed into fully-fledged standard languages. Could one not argue that the present degree of standardisation is adequate, that is: norms have been prescribed which are followed by publishers of school textbooks and by the editors of radio and television news, newspapers and by people who compose or translate public documents? Could one not further argue that, as regards language use in the legislatures of the country, public addresses by political and other leaders, the courts, annual reports by business corporations, and so on, that English is clearly the appropriate language to use and that the Bantu languages need not be used in these contexts? And finally: why can't we accept that teachers and learners use urban vernaculars and code-switching in classroom discussions? After all, the main issue in classroom discourse is that learners and teachers understand each other and can enter into dialogue.

The stance in this project is that all three these "arguments" are invalid, and that the development of fully-fledged standard languages is necessary for the following reasons:

- That it is highly unlikely that the majority of South Africans will acquire the necessary English language proficiency in order to attain meaningful access to educational, economic, political and social participation in South Africa. In this regard, one needs only to consider that English has been a school subject for more than a century in South Africa without the necessary success, and that a large percentage of South Africans do not have the exposure to English necessary to support their acquisition of it;
- That the use of English as medium of instruction (MoI) has been, still is and will continue to be, a serious obstacle to the educational development of many black learners;
- That there is a clear and generally accepted link between developed languages (read: languages with "fully-fledged standard varieties") and the intellectual activities of their speakers: A "developed language" is a language with a strong tradition of works of literary value, and is able to function effectively in discussions about issues at the highest levels of abstract thought;
- That there is similarly a clear and generally accepted link between the status and prestige of a language and the degree of self-esteem, emotional and social security of the members of its speech community;
- That the development of a democracy and of national unity in South Africa is directly dependent on its citizens' access to meaningful political participation at all three levels of government, which will only happen if the languages of these citizens are the languages which facilitate such access; and

- That the promotion and development of the (currently still) disadvantaged languages of South Africa are prescribed by the constitutional language stipulations.

A second necessary remark is that it is necessary to indicate how the basic terms in the project are understood.[7] In the following discussion, extended use is made of *A dictionary of sociolinguistics*, compiled by Swann et al. 2004

The phenomenon *language X* (say "Zulu") is generally difficult to describe, since the (linguistic) boundaries between languages are very often not clear. For example: where does the boundary between Zulu and Xhosa lie? Similarly, Afrikaans and Dutch are linguistically quite close to each other, but they are regarded and treated as different languages. And are British English, Nigerian English and American English the "same" language? The phenomenon "language" is often a political issue.

Linked to this is the fact that "*languages*" (specifically living, dynamic languages) are never homogeneous. They are generally collectivities of many varieties – different styles (formal and informal), different group varieties or dialects, and different registers (legal registers, academic "language", medical ways of speaking). For the purpose of this publication, the term *language* is used to refer to all the varieties collectively understood to constitute a particular "language". The language "Zulu" is thus a collection of the Zulu spoken in rural and urban areas, during traditional rituals, by older people and by younger people, in courts and in the privacy of homes and possibly also by urban street gangs.

Thus: languages are collections of varieties. However, the reverse process: allocating varieties to "languages", is often not easy. For example: is Iscamtho a variety of Zulu? And should Pretoria Sotho be seen as part of Tswana or Northern Sotho? And where does Tsotsitaal and Flaaitaal belong? Or: should certain varieties rather be considered as languages in their own right?

Another concept to be discussed is *standard language*. A standard language is very often regarded as "a relatively uniform variety of a language which does not show regional variation, and which is used in a wide range of communicative functions … Standard varieties tend to observe prescriptive, written norms, which are codified in grammars and dictionaries. … Standard languages may … be regarded as idealised varieties." (Swann et al, p. 295).

As pointed out above, in this project the term *standard language* is used to refer, in addition to the meaning given in the previous paragraph, to a 'fully-fledged standard

7 It is possible that other contributors to this volume may use these terms with differing meanings

language", that is, a variety which is accepted in the language community as the appropriate form of language for use in high-function formal contexts (such as teaching, government announcements, legislation, courts, etc.), is taught in schools and is therefore known by educated members of the community. In addition, standard languages also have a strong link with written language: in linguistic communities with a strong tradition of written forms – dictionaries, grammars, newspapers, literature, etc., that is, in highly literate communities, the standard variety is generally a fully-fledged variety.

In the preceding paragraphs the terms *variety* and *language* have been used, but without clear distinction. A language, as was pointed out, is a collection of varieties, and a variety is a separately identifiable form of language, which together with other varieties makes up a language. In this terminology it is therefore erroneous to speak of a standard *language*, since the standard form of a language is only one of the constituting varieties of a language. We should, linguistically seen, therefore rather use the term standard *variety* instead of standard *language*.

Finally: the term *vernacular*, sometimes used derogatively to refer to Bantu languages, means "relatively homogeneous and well-defined NON-STANDARD variet(y) which (is) used regularly by particular geographical, ethnic or SOCIAL GROUPS and which exist(s) in opposition to a dominant STANDARD variety …The vernacular is used when talking to friends and family in informal contexts." (Swann et al. 2004: p. 327). In this publication the term *vernacular* will not be used in its derogatory meaning.

A third matter to discuss is the need to be clear about the role of standard languages in the life of a community.

As pointed out above, a standard language is only *one* of a number of the varieties of a language. The mistake is often made to view standard languages as more important than other varieties (such as dialects and even urban vernaculars), and to regard them as the general "norm" for "appropriate" linguistic behaviour, as "proper" language, as the "correct" form of a language.[8] Such a view is mistaken. As pointed out above, all the varieties of a language are

8 African language practitioners are sometimes heard to refer to particular forms of their languages (usually the variety they accept as the "standard") as a (or even *the*) *pure* form of the language, whilst referring to urban forms or varieties as "adulterated", "degenerate", "corrupt", "impure" From a sociolinguistic perspective this stance is not justified. As pointed out lower down members of speech communities have quite differing cognitive social affective and creative needs that need to be expressed through language, and this they do by making use of the diversity available in their languages Linguistic diversity is an essential property of all languages (or, theoretically) seen: a "design feature" Furthermore no living language is without influences from other languages.

appropriate in particular contexts – in particular situations, in particular social groups or during the performance of particular activities. It would, for example, be inappropriate (improper, incorrect) for participants in a street brawl to use standard language, or for members of a funeral procession to use Tsotsitaal.[9] The basic point is that communities have a large variety of needs, need to perform very many different communicative functions with language, that individuals have to give expression to a large variety of personal and social identities, and operate in diverse contexts, and therefore they need a (linguistic) instrument that will allow them to function in diverse ways in different contexts. Human languages are per definition, by design, highly diverse, highly heterogeneous tools. The standard variety of a language is thus of *relative* importance.[10]

Cook, in this volume, discusses the impact of an overestimation of the standard language on the linguistic character of a speech community, arguing that such a development can "silence", "erase" linguistic diversity. This is quite possible, of course, if the public role of "standard languages" is misunderstood.

A further skewed perception about standard languages is that they are necessarily linked to nationalism, and that their promotion will somehow lead to a heightened ethnolinguistic awareness among their speakers, which may ultimately feed into a drive towards the promotion of own interests, eventually resulting in separatist movements. This is possible, one supposes, and may have happened in particular societies. However, the development of ethnolinguistic nationalism cannot be ascribed solely to the promotion of a community's standard language. There are too many other variables in nationalistic language movements.[11]

Still, the importance of the standard variety of a language must also be kept in mind. As the appropriate variety in high-function formal contexts, in particular as a written

9 Language practitioners sometimes make the mistake of assuming that only the standard variety of a language is "normalised", that is, has "norms" (practical guidelines for appropriate behaviour) All varieties of a language have norms, as the example in the text points out The difference between the norms of the standard variety and those of the other varieties is that the former are generally formally specified for example by an authoritative body appointed to perform the task of describing/prescribing the norms of the standard Standard varieties are generally externally "constructed" The norms of other varieties generally develop "spontaneously", through the "decisions" of the different groups in a speech community (For more views on the "constructedness" of languages, see Makoni, 2003 See also Alexander, 1989, who supported the notion of harmonised Nguni and harmonised Sotho)

10 For discussions on vernaculars and related issues, see the important work of Schuring 1985; Malimabe 1990; Ntshangase, 1993; and Calteux 1996

11 It is true though that a fine balance must be established and maintained between promoting a language through the promotion of its standard variety, the promotion of multilingualism and linguistic diversity, and the use of languages for achieving sectional political aims

form, the standard language must be accepted as the proper and appropriate target in first language study, and the aim of first-language teachers must be the development of learners' skills in using the standard variety in as many types of high-function formal contexts as possible. Furthermore, in so far as communication in school classrooms is in an African language, such communication should be in the standard form of the language, and not in an urban vernacular. Learners' linguistic skills in the standard variety of their primary languages must also be developed in content subjects, i.e. across-the-curriculum.

A final issue to be dealt with is the stages of the standardisation processes.

Based on the report on the first workshop (Webb et al, 2005), the following remarks can be made regarding the standardisation processes in the Bantu languages in South Africa:

(a) The primary phase in the standardisation of the Bantu languages, viz. the selection and determination of (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, lexical; spelling and writing) norms (generally referred to as *corpus planning*) seems to be well underway, being handled by the National Language Bodies under the guidance of PanSALB. Particular attention is also being paid to the development of technical terminology and registers. For a discussion of issues and problems regarding the development of technical terminology in the Bantu languages, see Taljard and Pare in this volume.

(b) There are, however, a number of problems. Particularly notable is the continued tension between rural and urban varieties. In discussing this matter, the 2005 workshop proposed that an "inclusive" approach, which was also called a "polycentric approach", be followed, that is, that linguistic features from more than one constituting dialect should be recognised as standard norms. It was argued that it was important that the selection and determination of norms do not alienate constituent communities. The notion of a standard language as exhibiting *flexible stability* was proposed, i.e. that standard languages allow for some degree of variation/linguistic pluralism. A significant corollary to this approach is that urban dialects, such as the Zulu of Soweto (so-called Gauteng Zulu), be recognised and accepted as varieties with their own integrity[12]

(c) As regards the other phases in the standardisation process, several tasks still require serious attention. The Constitutional language stipulations and the language policies at various levels and domains of government and at numerous institutions (such as universities) have established the *status* of the Bantu

12 Lafon 2005 proposed that Gauteng Zulu be formally recognised in the development of a fully-fledged standard Zulu particularly given the demographic and economic significance of communities in Soweto.

languages; however, as Lafon demonstrates in this volume: these languages do not yet have the prescribed status in language policy practice, for example as languages of study in the South African school system. Similarly, regarding the use of these languages, a large amount of developmental work also needs to be done, as Pretorius shows with respect to the field of literacy.

(d) Important phases in the development of the Bantu languages as fully-fledged standard languages are the process of promoting their acceptance by the community, developing speakers' proficiency in them (typically through the formal education system), and encouraging their wide-spread usage. These phases currently need serious attention (and will be one of the central issues to be discussed in the proposed third workshop, planned for 2008). A crucial requirement in these phases of the process is that they should be handled within a consultative and participatory approach, that is, a "bottom/up" approach, involving the speakers in the decision-making process. As Rammala demonstrates with reference to the Sepedi/Northern Sotho LRDC, the LRDCs will hopefully contribute meaningfully to the implementation of these phases of the standardisation processes.

(e) Linked directly to the previous matter, is, of course, the larger problem, namely addressing the negative attitudes to the Bantu languages. Important in this regard is establishing support for the standardisation process among the intellectual leaders of speech communities: teachers, church leaders, community leaders, writers, politicians, etc.

Changing negative attitudes to the Bantu languages in South Africa is a very complex and challenging matter, and various aspects need to be given attention. The primary requirement is that these languages attain value, in particular economic, intellectual and social value. Putting it simply, economic value means obtaining economic advantage through the use of a language: being awarded a business contract through a Bantu language being used in striking the deal, selling products (such as newspapers, television programmes, DVDs), getting a job, and so on. Another requirement is that the Bantu languages be used for intellectual purposes, for example in writing, besides school text-books, literary work such as novels and poetry, newspaper articles, tertiary textbooks, philosophical treatises, religious theses, scholarly journals, etc. Accompanying the acquisition of economic and intellectual value will be the acquisition of social value. In such ways, Bantu languages will develop into badges of high social standing.

Besides the important question of *what* the promotion of a language involves, is the question of *how* language promotion occurs. A good local example of this process is Afrikaans: a 150 years ago, Afrikaans was generally regarded as "a mere vernacular" (in the negative sense of the word), used only in the lowest social functions, was without a writing system and had no literature. Gradually, however, it became used as an instrument in the struggle against the imperialism of the British colonial government and against the Dutch-oriented elite's preference for Dutch (and English) in high-function contexts (such as the church and education). A number of teachers and church ministers then initiated a movement directed at the development (corpus planning) and promotion (status and prestige planning) of Afrikaans. Gradually, a feeling of pride in and loyalty to Afrikaans developed, and within about 60 years Afrikaans was recognised as a language of the public domain: used in the church, recognised alongside Dutch as a language of the state (in 1925), and used in courts and in schools. Today, as we know, Afrikaans is a fully-fledged standard language.

The political developments over the past 60-70 years (apartheid and the use of language for division, discrimination, manipulation and subordination), mean, of course, that the promotion of the Bantu languages can not be handled in the same way as Afrikaans though being in a far stronger position than Afrikaans was 150 years ago. Afrikaans was strongly supported by the development of Afrikaner nationalism, which, today, in the case of the Bantu languages, could conceivably lead to conflict if an excessive degree of ethnolinguistic nationalism developed in the course of their further development. However, there are some lessons which could profitably be learnt from the language political history of Afrikaans, for example: that language promotion is directly linked to language pride and loyalty, and secondly, that it is largely a bottom/up process – language promotion requires the support of its speakers. A public movement, driven by a dedicated community leadership, is required.

Directly linked to the issue of language promotion (as mentioned: largely a bottom/up process) is the question: Who must handle language standardisation?

Although standard languages can be developed by the leaders in a community (i.e. bottom/up), for example through the initiative and leadership of lexicographers, the process is often managed by bodies formally appointed to fulfil this task (i.e. by authoritative intervention).

In the case of the Bantu languages, missionaries and (later) educational authorities established language "boards" (or committees) to develop their written forms / orthographies, first for Xhosa and Zulu (late 19th century) and later for "Sotho-Tswana". In the time of

apartheid, especially from the 1960s onwards, the government proposed the elevation of these languages as official languages of the Bantustans (the "independent homelands") and established separate language boards for each of them, with the task of standardising them.

Today, the promotion and standardisation of the Bantu languages is handled by two institutions: the National Language Service of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), and PanSALB.[13, 14]

DAC is charged with regulating and monitoring the use of the official languages at both national and provincial levels. For this purpose, it houses a Chief Directorate called the National Language Service, which provides language services to other government structures. The main task of the National Language Service is to manage South Africa's linguistic diversity through language planning, human language technologies and terminology projects, and by providing a translation and editing service in the official languages and foreign languages. Its functions are "to develop, promote and protect the 11 official languages through policy formulation, legislation and the implementation of the language policy in order to allow South Africans to realise their language rights". It facilitates research and development in human language technology, e.g. the production of spellcheckers and dictionaries, the Telephone Interpretation System of South Africa (TISSA); and the management of the Language Research and Development Centres (LRDCs) (see Rammala for more details on these bodies).

PanSALB is charged with the task of promoting and creating conditions for the development and use of the official languages, the Khoe, Nama and San languages as well as South African Sign Language, and to promote and ensure respect for the heritage languages. To perform this task, PanSALB has established several bodies, viz. Provincial Language Committees (PLCs), National Language Bodies (NLBs) and National Lexicography Units.

There is one PLC per province (with 13 members), which consists of representatives of each language in the province (selected proportionately to the number of speakers in the province), and including Sign, Heritage and possibly Khoe and San languages.

The PLCs have the following strategic objectives:

- to provide advice to PanSALB on the best way in which to foster and improve cooperation and co-ordination of language matters between the different spheres

13 The following information is largely taken from the websites of DAC and PanSALB

14 In addition, there is also the *Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities*, which is tasked with the protection of language rights

of government; the best way in which to promote general awareness of the official and other languages in use in that province; the best way in which to promote and facilitate the drafting of language policies; to take account of the full extent of language resources available in that province and the methods to optimise those resources; and to develop human resources in all sectors involved in language matters.

- To assist in the protection of languages rights and the development of multilingualism.
- To identify the language needs of speakers of all official and other South Bantu languages at all levels of language use.
- To monitor the development of the necessary infrastructures, and to address the language service requirements of the province.
- To promote research and development projects which will lead to the greater use of Bantu languages in education.
- To establish a structural working relationship with National Lexicography Units (NLUs) and National Language Bodies.

There is one National Language Body for each of the 11 official languages as well as for Khoe, Nama and San and SA Sign Language. Their functions are the standardization of spelling and orthography, the development and standardisation of terminology and lexicography, the promotion of literature as well as to conduct research and initiate projects such as educational projects.

There is also one National Lexicographic Unit (NLU) for each of the 11 official languages, and their function is to compile and create dictionaries and, thus, also to establish and disseminate the standardised spelling, orthography and terminology.

The establishment of DAC's National Language Service and PanSALB is, of course, central to language promotion and development in South Africa. However, it is essential that both be subjected to critical evaluation, and that questions such as the following be asked: What products / outcomes have they produced? Have they proved to be effective? Is there sufficient co-operation between the different agencies in the interests of the common goal? Is the overall management of the language development agencies effectively handled?

In conclusion, it is necessary to keep in mind that, although the work of official institutions in the standardisation of the Bantu languages is of central importance, they, alone, cannot succeed in the effective promotion of the standard varieties of these languages. The status and prestige of these languages, the proficiency of their speakers in these varieties and their use in public contexts are significantly dependent on actors who play a prominent part

as role-models in language use: first-language teachers as well as teachers of content subjects, language practitioners (translators, interpreters, text editors and writers) and members of the media.

The development of the Bantu languages as fully-fledged standard languages is the joint responsibility of public authorities (a top/down process), and civil society initiatives / NGOs (a bottom/up process), working in concert.

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