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Bernard Cros

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The New Language Policy of South African Public Television

The South African interim constitution (Constitution of South Africa Act n°200 of 1993) that came into effect on 27 April 1994 has put a lot of pressure on the national public broadcaster by recognising no less than eleven official languages. In March 1995, the IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority¹) issued the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) its new mandate which specified that each official language should be served equitably by the public radio and television services. The apartheid régime had favoured the emergence of ethnic television stations: TV1 was designed mainly for White viewers and broadcast in English and Afrikaans, and later, stations were created to cater for Black viewers using vernacular languages.

The new SABC Board of Governors, nominated in May 1993, decided that the blatant language inequalities upon which the apartheid TV system rested should be redressed by relaunching three new channels on 4 February 1996. Regarding language, the Board had to address three main issues: catering for all official languages; ridding the channels of their racial identities; promoting means to ensure that as wide a public as possible understand the content of the programmes. This paper proposes to scrutinise the modifications made to the South African public television's language policy, the solutions that have been devised to respond to the new political dispensation, particularly the dominant position of English, and whether such solutions can succeed in accomplishing a clear-cut symbolical departure from the old apartheid order.

Background

Most Black languages spoken in South Africa belong to two groups, Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, siNdebele and SiSwati) and Sotho (Sesotho, Sepedi and Setswana), and represent approximately 85% of Black speakers (only

¹ The IBA was set up in 1993 to regulate the broadcasting environment. It is independent of the government. Among its attributions are monitoring programmes, issuing radio and TV licences to broadcasters and ensuring fair competition in a deregulated environment.

xiTsonga and Tshivenda, though Bantu languages, do not belong to one of the dominant families). Originally, the differences inside each family were of a dialectal nature but they were naturalised by apartheid. Thus SiSwati is merely a Zulu dialect but has reached the status of a "full" language after years of voluntarist promotion by the apartheid administration. Most Black South Africans can speak two or three languages from their language group. Many can also understand, at least partially, several more because the languages share a fair amount of common features inside the Nguni and Sotho groups.

The radio FM network, started in the 1960s, helped considerably in reifying these languages with nine Black vernacular stations (called Radio Bantu collectively), each serving a specific "ethnic group" in its own language, and was devised to support the notorious "homeland" (or bantustan) policy which the Nationalist governments tried to implement from 1960 onwards. But as a more expensive, more complex and less adaptable medium, television could not follow a similar pattern. TV1, launched in 1976, was a bilingual 50/50 English-Afrikaans channel. TV2/3 was launched in 1982 and used Black languages. It was split one year later into TV2, which served the two main Nguni languages (Xhosa and Zulu), and TV3 which served the three Sotho languages. For practical reasons, the project was not as far-reaching as in the case of radio but the principle of segregation, and particularly the non-mixing of languages was clearly related to the apartheid dogma of cultural purity.

In 1992, TV2 and TV3 were amalgamated to form CCV-TV which broadcast in the five main Black languages and English, thus eroding the apartheid model of complete segregation. As a multilingual channel, CCV addressed mainly Black viewers with a mix of sports and fiction programmes and met with almost immediate success. Multilingual shows also developed. Gradually, public television moved closer to integration but CCV was still labelled as the "Black channel", while TV1 could not shed its image as the "White channel" until 1996.

Two options

The basic assumption is that apartheid languages have taken on such "a degree of real material existence in the form of codifications and educative and media infrastructures" (Louw 137) that they are now taken for granted. It is now impossible not to use them unless one would like to go against a section of the community and reinstate cultural domination and discrimination. The ANC's policy recognised the *de facto* existence and rights of the eleven languages and has imposed its view in the new dispensation (ANC 43).

Bearing that point in mind, the SABC had to choose from two paradigms devised by researchers and academics for the new TV

dispensation. One called the "preference model" was based on the principle that "the SABC would cluster its audiences according to their needs and wants" (SABC *The TV Channel* 3). Each channel had a specific identity, one channel being devoted to adult and family programming (drama and news), another to youth programmes (education, music, films) and the third one (100% English) to professional and specialised viewers (*Delivering Value* 6). Languages were mixed on the first two channels, either "rotating" every day to ensure regular exposure in prime time, or remaining fixed. The advantage of this sociological approach is to group viewers irrespective of race on the basis of common interests and across language differences. The disadvantage is to complicate programme scheduling and confuse viewers.

A second option, the "language based model", was finally chosen. It starts from the assumption that South Africa is first and foremost a multilingual society which has to accommodate all citizens equitably. In some ways, this choice reflects the central place of the language issue in South African society and the broadcasting field. The three channels were relaunched on February 4, 1996: SABC1 used the network of the former CCV-TV to broadcast in the Nguni languages (Zulu, Xhosa, siNdebele and SiSwati) and English; SABC2 replaced TV1 and broadcast in the Sotho languages (Sesotho, Sepedi, Setswana), in xiTsonga, Tshivenda and Afrikaans; and NNTV was followed by SABC3 which uses exclusively English, except on Sundays when it broadcasts a few community programmes in Greek, Italian, Portuguese, German and Sign Language. We shall now expose the model's characteristics.

Demographics

The whole set of rules regarding language on TV rests on the notion of equity as a pillar of democracy and on avoiding conflict in the reconciliation process. According to section 31 of the interim Constitution, "every person shall have the right to use the language of his or her choice". This is reinforced by the well-established fact in communication research that people prefer to watch programmes in their own language. Therefore, in a multilingual democracy such as South Africa, the TV schedules, particularly prime time viewing (see table 1), should reflect the linguistic composition of the population, "the only fair and rational basis for determining an equitable allocation of broadcast time and resources" (*Intercom* n°8, 4).

Unfortunately, the existing terrestrial transmission network is still limited. By February 1996, SABC1 could reach 72.5% of the population, SABC2, 76.4%; and SABC3, 56.1% (See maps 2, 3 and 4). Sentech, the independent state enterprise in charge of the distribution system, plans to add more transmitters but the cost is prohibitive because the rural areas not yet covered are very scarcely populated. Satellite developments should offer solutions in the short to medium term. Already, all SABC channels are available from the PanAmSat satellite with an appropriate dish.

Table 1: Home languages of the South African population and respective proportions allotted in prime time (17:00-23:00) on SABC 1 and SABC 2.

(Sources: AMPS 1993; *Intercom*, n°8, Dec. 7, 1995, p.4.)

Language	Home language (MI)	Home language (%)	% on SABC 1	% on SABC 2
Zulu (N)	8,5	21,96	11,72	—
Xhosa (N)	6,6	17,03	11,72	—
Afrikaans	5,8	15,03	—	14,50
Sepedi (S)	3,7	9,65	—	7,57
English	3,5	9,01	53,34	40,98
Setswana (S)	3,3	8,59	—	8,20
Sesotho (S)	2,6	6,73	—	6,30
Xisonga	1,7	4,35	—	0,63
SiSwati (N)	1	2,57	0,59	—
Tshivenda	0,9	2,22	—	0,63
SiNdebele (N)	0,6	1,55	0,59	—
Other	0,5	1,31	—	—
Multilingual	—	—	22,04	21,19
Total	38,7	100,00	100,00	100,00

N.B.: The home language figures are based on the 1991 census and should be considered as mere trends in a rapidly changing environment. N: Nguni; S: Sotho.

Regionalisation

The interim constitution created nine provinces which have to choose two, three or four official languages (logically the most spoken ones, though few languages dominate heavily. See table 2 and map 1). The SABC decided to abide by this principle in order to better reflect the nation's life, and chose to set up nine regional bureaux which will be responsible for providing news items and produce local programmes. This system enables the SABC to accommodate minority languages more adequately and meet its linguistic obligations as public broadcaster. Regional programmes are probably a better way to speak to people about what they care for in their own language than the national networks which tend more to exclude people than include them within the viewing community.

Thus for the first time ever, the four less-spoken official languages (siNdebele, SiSwati, Tshivenda and xiTsonga) were granted regular programmes, even though the move was rather symbolical since each was awarded less than 0.6% of prime time broadcasts. These languages are concentrated in the Northeast and have limited markets which announcers can best address through regional broadcasts.

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Table 2 : Home languages according to regions.

(Source: A-Z of South African Politics 1995. Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 1995.)

Region	Home languages
Eastern Cape	Xhosa 85%; Afrikaans; 9%; English 3%
Gauteng (formerly PWV)	Afrikaans 20%; isiZulu 15%; English 15%
Kwazulu-Natal	Zulu 80%; English 15%
Mpumalanga (form. Eastern Transvaal)	SiSwati 40%; Zulu 28%; Afrikaans 9%; siNdebele
Northern Cape	Afrikaans 65%; Setswana 22%; Xhosa 4%
Northern Province (form. Northern Transvaal)	Sepedi 56%; xiTsonga 22%; Tshivenda 12%
North West	Setswana 63%; Xhosa 14%; Sesotho 8%
Free State	Sesotho 56%; Afrikaans 12%; Xhosa 9%
Western Cape	Afrikaans 63%; English 20%; Xhosa 16%

Regional programming started on SABC2 on 5 February 1996 between 18:00 and 18:30 on weekdays. The principle is to use only one language on any one day's broadcast. Thus, the Western Cape broadcasts *The Cape at 6/Die Kaap om 6* in Xhosa on Mondays and Wednesdays, in Afrikaans on Tuesdays and Thursdays and in English on Fridays. In July 1996, KwaZulu/Natal started *KZN-2-Nite* in Zulu (Mon. and Thurs.), English (Tues. and Fri.) and Afrikaans (Wed.). Yet this rule was breached when financial reasons prompted the SABC to amalgamate the Northern and Mpumalanga provinces into one cluster, thus forcing the new bureau to cater for no less than seven languages. It was decided that each evening session would be shared between two languages to accommodate everyone (table 3) until the two provinces can be served independently. The Johannesburg area (Gauteng) should be faced with a similar problem. During the regional broadcasts, a national programme is available for regions which do not enjoy such programmes. Depending on its financial capacity, the SABC plans to accommodate all provinces by 1998.

Table 3: Language mix on the Northern Province-Mpumalanga regional broadcasts on SABC2.

(Source: *Intercom*, n°16, Feb. 15, 1996, p.4.)

Days	Languages
Mondays	SiSwati and siNdebele
Tuesdays	Tshivenda and Sepedi
Wednesdays	SiSwati and siNdebele
Thursdays	Afrikaans and English
Fridays	xiTsonga and Sepedi

Comprehension

It seems logical that a broadcaster should offer programmes in home languages which are the essential carriers of culture and that broadcast time should be apportioned according to the number of speakers. However, very few individuals understand all eleven official languages and only Zulu is spoken as a home language by more than 20% of the population. Therefore, "shared comprehension" became a crucial point for the SABC and solutions had to be found to enable as many people as possible to watch a programme in a language he/she stands a good chance to understand. This is why the SABC grouped Nguni languages (spoken as home language by 43,11% of the population) on SABC1 and Sotho languages (25%) on SABC2, which are to good extent mutually intelligible.

There is nothing unnatural in such language groupings which search to encourage the communicative value of the broadcasts. In July 1995, the SABC stated that "priority will be given to shared languages so as to maximise understanding by the widest possible audience — that is, English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Sepedi and Sesotho" (*Delivering Value — Part Two* 40). Very simply, SiSwati and siNdebele speakers stand a better chance of understanding a programme in Zulu than in Setswana. Programmes must be kept within the borders of comprehension. Finally, SABC1 and SABC2 broadcast time blocks of sufficient length (two hours generally including the news) in one language to ensure viewer approval and avoid confusing people by using several languages in a given programme.

English as lingua franca

English is the home language of only 3.5 million South Africans, making it the nation's fifth language behind Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans and Sepedi, and is not the first language in any of the nine provinces. Surveys indicate that between 30% and 50% of the population has an understanding of the language (the difference depends on the definition of "understanding"). Yet English now represents more than 45% of broadcast time on SABC1 and SABC2, while SABC3 is 100% English. Specific cultural and broadcasting factors favoured this move. For 30 years, English has been the language of freedom and social uplifting for many Blacks and the Black Consciousness movement wanted English to be adopted as the country's sole national language (Louw 136). It is also the language of the political scene: in 1994, 87% of the speeches made in Parliament were in English (Senate 12). Black leaders also prefer to be interviewed in the more prestigious English rather than in Xhosa or Zulu. It is also the idiom of international relationships, the means to meet the world again as South Africa rejoined the Commonwealth in 1993. The ANC chose English as a *lingua franca* for the country and education in its political platform (ANC 34).

Research has shown that Blacks generally prefer English over any other language if they cannot get a programme in their mother tongue. Yet, social status and education preside over this choice: "The higher the LSM², the higher the preference for English (and Afrikaans)" (Thirion 2). Lower-class Blacks prefer Zulu. By 1993, 94% of the Blacks who went beyond primary education could understand English and 84% Zulu, while 79% of the Blacks with no or little formal education could understand Zulu and only 35% English (SABC Radio Active 128). Since English is also better understood by urban dwellers, it was decided that the existing network whose footprint covered metropolitan areas only (NNTV, renamed SABC3. See map 2) would be an all-English channel. Thus SABC3 has a definite commercial stance so as to cross-subsidise the less viable minority services. It addresses people who are most likely to understand English and consequently those with a better buying power. English, as the language of the business community, also appeared as the natural language of advertising, as it has always been since the 1950s, and advertisers are eager to use it as an effective marketing tool. Therefore, the SABC also selected English over Zulu because of its potential in the business field.

SABC3 is also intended as a sort of cultural spare wheel, to provide the majority of viewers with an alternative channel in case their home language is not used on SABC1 or SABC2. Zulu was not considered because of its limited future and international potential. SABC3 is nothing new to South African viewers. They have been used to a steady diet of English shows ever since English was used as a main language on one public channel. At the time, availability favoured American programmes (British programmes were under the ban of actors' union Equity), and affordability (such programmes are both cheap and easy to obtain) in the midst of financial turmoil was the bottom line. TV4, started in 1986 to bring in more advertising revenue, was an all-English service which used the TV2 and TV3 networks after 9 p.m. During the transition period, it was followed by TSS in 1992 and NNTV in 1994, but its content shifted from pure entertainment (TV4) to sport and movies (TSS, i.e. TopSport Surplus), and then to community and educational programmes (NNTV). Consequently, some 60% of all South African viewers (the urban dwellers) are used to having an alternative choice in English.

The situation has not changed much since 1986. If English is so massively used, it is because American imports are by far the most affordable and do not need dubbing. As Jill Chisholm, Chief Executive of SABC TV, explained in October 1996, "SABC TV has always had a predominance of English programming from Day One... because we had to maintain a balance between bought-in material and locally produced programmes largely because of financial factors" (*Intercom* n°49 3).

² The Living Standard Measures are income categories used in the business world for marketing purposes. They range from LSM 1 (poorest) to LSM 8 (richest).

The question of Afrikaans

The most serious "victim" of the realignment was Afrikaans, which suffered a spectacular reduction of its air time. Until 1996, Afrikaans had always enjoyed 50% of TV1's broadcast time and had to settle for less than 15% on SABC2. Officially, the SABC intended to redress "historical imbalances" (SABC *The TV Channel Options* 7) and fight "linguicism" (the illegitimate domination of a group of people through its language over those who do not speak it. The -ism ending refers to sexism and racism. Senate 10). This evolution had deep political implications. For the Blacks, Afrikaans was the language of oppression and it was only fair that its broadcast time should be cut drastically in order to correct what was felt as unjustified political favouritism.

On the other hand, some Afrikaans-speakers felt threatened as a cultural group by the new policy especially since radio and TV had been instrumental in its development and dissemination in the past. Thus, in 1992, the far-right Conservative Party called on Afrikaners to burn their TV sets in front of the SABC's HQs, and has kept urging them not to pay their licence fee for a service that almost ignored them. Few of them actually did burn their sets but the SABC is still concerned about the non-payment of licences. The Afrikaners are not the only ones who worry about limited Afrikaans broadcasts. The 5 million Coloureds, 85% of whom have Afrikaans as home language, also claim that they have been forgotten by the SABC. However, the reduction of Afrikaans broadcasting time can by no means be considered as illegitimate. Afrikaans is second only to English in proportion on SABC-TV (table 1) though Zulu and Xhosa which are more spoken and understood enjoy less air time. Moreover, Afrikaans is used in regional programmes in the three Cape provinces where it is widely spoken.

Dubbing and simulcasting

Technical processes such as dubbing and subtitles can facilitate shared comprehension, but the choice of the language model has reduced the need for assisted simultaneous comprehension while dubbing is very expensive. The SABC's dubbing department used to dub almost only into Afrikaans shows while dubbing into Black languages is going to be dropped because of dubious results: "You end up with Kojak speaking Zulu in New York, and we don't want to perpetuate that" (Jill Chisholm, *Intercom* n°49 3). As of October 1996, SABC1 broadcast 28 dubbed programmes each week and SABC2 21 in most official languages (*Intercom* n°28 6). Subtitles are unpractical because of the low literacy rate (around 55% of the adult population is functionally illiterate. Fourie 49). Simulcasting (the FM broadcast of the original soundtrack of a dubbed movie shown

simultaneously on TV) has been almost abandoned for financial reasons in spite of its past success.

Model limitations

The new South African public television tries to reconcile antinomic aims: comprehension and promotion of all languages and cultures, reconciliation and marketing coherence, building of a common identity and respect of differences. The main advantage of the new dispensation is its democratic aspect which tends to depoliticise the issue of language, always hotly debated, by treating each idiom equally, and caters for local content. From a professional broadcasting point of view, the lineup simplifies scheduling, reduces channel hopping and encourages viewer allegiance by creating viewing habits and stability, something which the marketing people always appreciate because it enables them to plan their campaigns more efficiently. The advertising community preferred the former distinction of TV2 and TV3 between Nguni and Sotho and lobbied for the reintroduction of a similar pattern.

But the model has one basic flaw. The language shares on SABC1 and SABC2 are based on total population figures as if everyone in the Republic owned a TV set. Yet while 96% of all White homes possess a TV set, less than 49% of Black homes do (AMPS 1994). More than 10 million people watch the SABC channels daily but the electrification of Black townships and rural areas is far from complete thus limiting access to TV. In 1994, 83% of the Whites watched television at least once a week but only 38% of the Blacks (AMPS 1994). In other words, the model will live up to its expectations once TV reaches a higher penetration rate among Blacks.

The lineup has other disadvantages. First, the SABC cannot use complementary scheduling across channels since all have to carry every programme type. In turn, this prevents the emergence of channel identities and reduces marketing efficiency. The crucial point however is that the lineup is reminiscent of the old apartheid TV order. If it does provide deracialisation (since English and Afrikaans are mingled with Sotho and Nguni on similar channels and programmes), it also reinstates the language separation which CCV had successfully started to fight off, so that it cannot be argued that the language preference model was implemented because viewers were used to it. In a 1993 survey, seven Black South Africans out of ten claimed that the mixing of languages in one programme was very or rather acceptable (Choshane and Van der Walt 17). A Sotho presenter complained that his trilingual show, which used to get high satisfaction rates on CCV, could not be broadcast anymore³ (*Intercom* n°15 5). Language mixing is not felt as an obstacle by viewers but has been deemed problematic

³ Dosto Noge used to host *Kamobikelo/ Ngomqibelo* which got a 73% satisfaction rate among viewers in 1992 (Choshane 4).

by the SABC. It is seldom used except for live sporting events when commentators share a common microphone because broadcasting the same football game on the three networks to ensure maximum coverage is obviously unpractical. CCV used to broadcast football with three commentators (one English, one Nguni, one Sotho) speaking ten minutes each and TV1 used to have two rugby commentators (one English, one Afrikaans).

By substituting ethnic segmentation with demographical calculations as a way out of apartheid and into democracy, public television has merely maintained language separation as the main organiser — critics say divider — of the TV public broadcasting system. Moreover, the division does not correspond to people's daily experience. Most viewers, either Whites or Blacks, are immersed in a multilingual context, either at home or on the workplace, even though White South Africans are still reluctant to learn Black languages. In the townships, for example, the apartheid authorities were never able to keep up with ethnic segregation. Individuals from different backgrounds increasingly mixed and married beyond the borders of their respective "tribes", used different languages and sometimes mingled them into hybrid vernaculars. This will be increasingly true as South Africa moves deeper into the democratic era.

Favouring local production

Thus, paradoxically, the respect paid to the democratic principle of equitability, engraved in the Constitution as a healing element in the reconciliation process, fails to promote nation-building and the development of a common allegiance to South Africa, and could even lead to ethnic strife if political movements decide to build on "nationalism". In order to make things work, the SABC has to pay attention to the content of its broadcasts. No one can deny that the programmes are completely different from what they used to be in terms of freedom of speech, race relations and racial representations and the basic assumption of the apartheid ideology, i.e. the absoluteness of ethnic and linguistic categories, has been discarded. The new system calls for more Black language production, erstwhile considered as inferior — at best marginally valuable — compared with the official English and Afrikaans programmes. Redressing broadcast time will be efficient if, and only if, people get a sense that they are truly accounted for as fully respected citizens in their country thanks to quality programming.

Thus the SABC intends to reach a local production level of 60% by 1998 (*Delivering Value III* 6) and "double the amount of youth drama in Zulu and Xhosa, triple the youth drama in [se]Pedi, Sotho and [se]Tswana... and see youth drama in [xi]Tsonga, [Tshi]Venda, [isi]Ndebele and Seswati for the first time ever" (*Delivering* 8). Given the amount of intended vernacular broadcasting, Black production should be given a phenomenal

boost provided human and financial resources are made available. The recruitment of mother-tongue TV professionals in those rare languages which had hitherto been left outside the sphere of television is problematic. In 1995, there was only one known Tshivenda director in the whole world. (*Delivering Value — Part Two 4*).

Television has been an experience shared by all South Africans regardless of race since 1976, perhaps the only common denominator of the whole population. Indeed, before the Black channels were launched, several thousand Blacks owned TV sets and watched TV1, intended for Whites, and their number increased afterwards in most urban areas. *Dallas* was as popular in the townships as in the rich suburbs of Johannesburg. Blacks and Coloureds and Indians and Whites watched American serials where Blacks and Whites and Hispanics and others were often shown living and working together, even though the reverse (Whites watching Nguni and Sotho programmes) was seldom true. Therefore, consistent programming and impartial news across language barriers will be the best way to promote the New South Africa and a common feeling of belonging through the building of a stock of common references.

Bernard CROS

Université Michel-de-Montaigne Bordeaux-III

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MAPS

Map 1

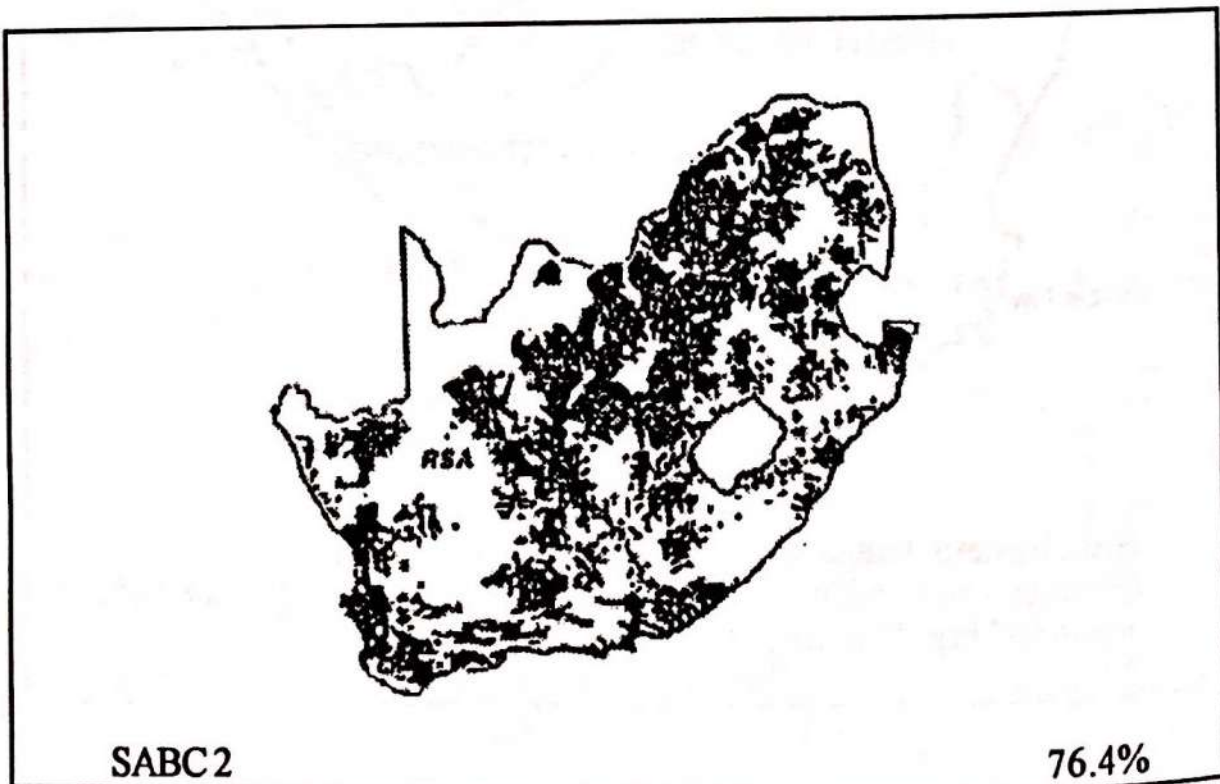
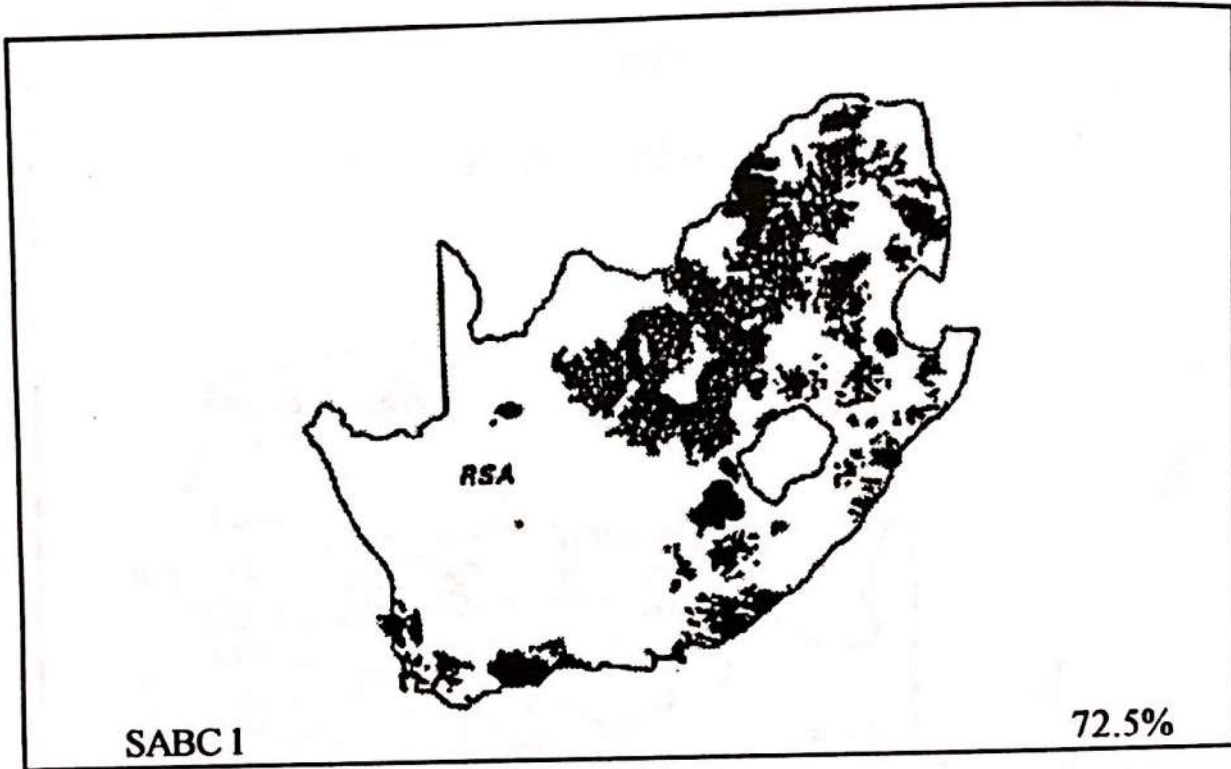
The nine provinces of South Africa 1995



N.B.: Eastern Transvaal is now called Mpumalanga.
(Source: *The Weekly Mail & Guardian A-Z of South African Politics*,
Johannesburg: Penguin, 1995, p. 276).

Map 2

Television coverage in South Africa, January 1996 (After Sentech 1994)



The New Language Policy of South African Public Television

