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IDENTITY AND EXILE

Edited by
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The English Language in South Africa: Empowerment and Domination

English in South Africa seems to be above all the mother tongue of the South Africans whose ancestors were born in the British Isles. It was one of South Africa's two official languages between 1910 and 1993 which helps explain why though it has always been a minority language (it is the mother tongue of less than 3.5 million people), English became the most popular vehicle for public life – in the public service, at school, in the national media. Today, English is protected by the Constitution as just one of eleven official languages, but practice has made it a vehicular idiom for people with different mother tongues in the multilingual context of the country and it is more and more needed to lead South Africa back onto the global stage. The questions that arise are: must English become the country's *lingua franca* or would such a move endanger the nation-building and democracy-building processes now at work?

The identity of English in South Africa has changed tremendously since it started as a colonial language spoken by a limited number of British settlers. Today it is the dominant language of politics, administration and trade spoken by many other people than the mere descendants of those exiles. Yet throughout its two centuries of presence at the southern tip of Africa, English has retained one feature: it has always been at least one of the languages of the country's élites and bourgeoisie and, as such, the dominant medium of communication in and between the centres of power. More recently English has become a *lingua franca* across racial barriers for the middle class, including the limited Black middle class. The English language has gradually lost its narrow focus as a cultural marker of a mere British identity and has become a crucial tool language for many citizens whose mother tongue or home language is not English in the democracy-building process through which South Africa is passing.

English Speakers in South Africa: A Diverse Group

In South Africa, English speakers make up such a heterogeneous category that one can hardly speak of a 'community'. English was first brought by Englishmen and Scotsmen who emigrated to South Africa in the early 19th century when the British Empire took over the Cape Colony from Holland. After the first consequent and lasting settlement of 4,000 people on the eastern coast of the Cape Colony in 1820, most emigrants stayed in existing towns or villages, or founded new ones, both on the coast and in the hinterland. Other large inputs of British immigrants occurred in the 1840s in Natal, and after diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1885 were discovered in the Republics of the Transvaal and Orange. 19th century British immigration to South Africa was never massive, sometimes less than 1,000 a year, because the wages offered to labourers were so low that few Whites were ready to accept 'kaffir (black) work'. Unlike their Australian or Canadian counterparts, White English-speaking South Africans (ESSAs) have never been the leading demographic force in their new land. The expression 'English-speaking South Africans' itself is deceptive. For most people, it means 'White mother tongue English speakers of British background' who nowadays represent barely more than half of the mother tongue English speakers. Several waves of non-British white immigrants adopted English as their vehicular, and often home, language on arriving in the country: Russian, German and Lithuanian Jews in the 19th century, Italians and Greeks after World War II, and a large number of Portuguese citizens after the end of Portugal's rule in Angola and Mozambique in 1975, are among the most notable.

Secondly, a growing proportion of the Coloured community (almost 16%, i.e. more than 500 000 people), whose language has traditionally been Afrikaans, are now also using English as a home language. Yet the largest homogeneous English-speaking group are the Indians (approximately 1 million people) descended from indentured labourers who came to work in the cotton and sugar cane growing areas of Natal in the 1860s. Working mainly under the guidance of English masters, they had to learn some English but kept speaking their original languages (Gujerati, Hindi, Urdu and Tamil essentially). After they became free, those workers adopted English in the anglicized context of Durban where they had settled massively. As immigration from India was brought to an end, the younger generations gradually forgot the languages of their forefathers which were kept for cultural purposes. This process took some time since by the mid-70s, 50% of the South African Indians said they could speak at least some

of one of these languages. Today, English is the vehicular language of virtually all Asians. A radio station called Radio Lotus, operating from Durban for the Indian community, has been broadcasting almost exclusively in English since it was launched in 1983.

Since English has been adopted by so many 'non-British' as their main language, ESSAs are being deprived of what was almost the only element that tied them together and could be wielded as a distinctive cultural feature, especially after South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961. ESSAs are notorious for being the least multilingual of all South Africans, a flaw in a country with at least 20 acknowledged languages. Even though Afrikaans was compulsory for them at school, they were not really forced to use it in the workplace, as most of them entered the English-dominated private sector. On the contrary, Afrikaners knew that learning English could secure a position in the public service where bilingualism was an obligation. Backed by the power and confidence of the British Empire and Commonwealth, ESSAs never felt threatened and have always felt confident about their language. At the same time, they have not really developed a sense of exclusiveness: ESSA élites have almost never used English for ethnic claims or to mobilize their community, unlike the Afrikaners who used Afrikaans *consciously* as a political weapon.

A Language of Empowerment

Yet, in spite of being the only imported official language of South Africa (the other ten are indigenous languages, including Afrikaans which is only a far cry from the Dutch spoken by the early settlers), English has imposed itself as the language of power and empowerment. Historically, British subjects dominated the early phases of the country's economic development. In the towns, 'business tended to fall in the hands of British settlers' (Davenport 489) who became shopkeepers whereas most Afrikaners were farmers. The English language had no competitor as the natural tool for commercial communication when the trade networks developed between the towns. South African English has always been the language of the cities where decision-making and trade are performed, in modern industrial societies. Most Europeans settled in the towns, often remaining in or around the harbour where they had landed, and adopted English because it was the vehicular language. The gold diggers of the 1880s settled in what became mushroom urban areas. To a large extent, the rise of English and capitalism in South Africa have had similar courses. In a developing economy, the towns became the places of the accumulation of capital in the

hands of English speakers. In the early 20th, Blacks and Afrikaners who came to the cities found themselves in subservient positions, forced to acquire English to get a job from British employers who held a large proportion of the country's economy in their hands.

Business and urbanisation are not enough to explain the growth of English. English was the *de facto* language of colonial administrators, until the 1910 Constitution made English one of the Union of South Africa's two official languages, the other being Dutch. Even though both languages were 'to be treated on a footing of equality and possessed equal freedom, rights and privileges' (Liebenberg and Spies 49), English became the most popular vehicle for public life – in state administrations, government affairs and at school. In the 20th century, large-scale industrial and urban growth gave the language its pivotal position. The language used by the state is of paramount importance because citizens who cannot speak it are virtually excluded from the nation. Such anglicization was steadfastly enforced and made English the language of cultural empowerment. This should come as no surprise since a community that controls both the political life and the economy tends to impose its own cultural references on the rest of the population. In 1822, Governor Lord Charles Somerset issued a proclamation that English was to be the only language of courts, schools and administration, though the Dutch settlers, the rulers' primary targets, outnumbered the British by 8 to 1. Imperial Britain then made sure that English remained the natural language for public life. After the Boer Republics were defeated in 1902, another fit of anglicization fell on the unruly Afrikaners, when Lord Milner, the High Commissioner for South Africa, imposed English as the sole medium of instruction in state schools. Afrikaans was repressed and any child caught speaking Afrikaans was punished, a frequent situation in exoglossic contexts.

School has always been a prime vehicle for the dissemination of culture, but the mass media have become extremely potent. And the well-established South African media are overwhelmingly English. Newspapers were started by the British, who brought the first printing press in 1795. Drawing on the English experience, and as an urban phenomenon, one or two newspapers were systematically established in each town or village. Today, the deepest influence lies with cinema, radio and TV which channel a deep Anglo-American influence into the urban mass culture, even among Blacks with little or no spoken or written practice of the language. A major element is that all the media are commercial, including the public service radio stations and television channels. The British press has been closely associated with the country's commercial elite and defends a broad liberal

outlook. Most English titles belong to, or relate closely to, Anglo American, the country's largest industrial and financial holding. Since the pioneer days of commercial radio in the 1950s, most announcers have wanted their products to be advertised in English because it is the most widely understood language among the essentially urban markets they have been targeting. The relationship with the English-dominated economic sector is vital for the country's commercial activity.

Radio, which is extremely popular with Blacks, uses mainly the vernacular tongues, but not television. TV, which was started in 1976 as a single English/Afrikaans bilingual public service channel, could not stay away from cheap American products as the financial burden became heavier over time. Consequently it increased its offer in English which urban Blacks adopted quickly, especially after 1985 when an all-English national evening channel was launched. Today, English is the most widely used language on the public service channels, as well as on M-Net, an encrypted pay service, which broadcasts massively in English, marginally in Afrikaans and uses no Black languages, on the market-driven grounds that its customers are primarily upper-class Whites. In 1997, TV attracted more than 15 million daily viewers, a majority of whom are Blacks whose first language is not English.

It is the context of use which gives a language its status. For a language to become powerful, it must be used by élites as a communication device, and marketed to the people as a step to empowerment and a needed transcultural device, even more so in a multilingual society. In a modern, rapidly industrializing urban setting, English became the language of the various dominant élites of the country: in politics, in administration, in business, trade and industry, in culture, in the media, at school. More recently, English was adopted by the emerging Black bourgeoisie as something to look up to, in spite of ethnic revival tendencies which advocate the exclusive use of vernaculars. Therefore, when the building of democracy during the 'transaction period'¹ demanded the empowerment of the Black languages, the question was asked: should English be allowed to retain its dominant though efficient position in influential sectors of society when 60% of the population could not speak it at all?

The Language Debate in the Transition Period: Should English Be an Official *lingua franca*?

The euphoria of democratization and vast promises of equality somewhat blurred the realities of the language context until after the first 'one man

one vote' elections of 1994. The domination of English started to worry Black scholars and thinkers as they noticed a growing tendency to unilingualism in public spheres and in the workplace. They felt that, added to the consequences of apartheid's cultural fractionism, this was leading to further disempowerment of Blacks and contradicted the equal opportunity principle which the young democracy claims to live by, by preventing many people from getting a job in their own country.

Compared with its numerical importance, the symbolical and functional power of English is enormous. Mother tongue English speakers represent less than 10% of the population and it is considered that 40% to 45% – an optimistic figure – can understand English. Zulu is the leading language but it is spoken by only 22% of the population and understood by hardly more than 50%. Unless it becomes essential in the economy, in the educational system, in government matters or the media, Zulu, as well as Afrikaans, will lag behind English, as South Africa's dominant language. Thus, since in truly multilingual contexts, i.e. when at least three languages are largely used in a given country, one of them tends to dominate and impose itself as a *lingua franca*, the government was left with three options when devising the new official language policy – by and large, one free market *v* two forms of state intervention: 1 *laissez faire*; 2 imposing English; 3 implementing an interventionist policy with constitutional and legal obligations regarding the use of all the languages spoken in South Africa.

The Case for English as South Africa's Linking Language

Cost and practicality factors point to the necessity of limiting the use of other languages and entrench English as the dominant medium of power, decision-making and public life. In fact, under market pressure, English is already imposing itself because it is cheap and effortless to implement. Of course, ESSAs defend such an option. Many of them assume that English is universally spoken or that this should be the rule. The private sector is a strong lobbyist, considering that for the country to develop properly and create jobs, English should not be repressed but imposed because it is the most efficient tool of communication, because it is the only South African language with a world audience, and because it is the only one spoken by most members of the country's élites. This option is often presented as common sense, whereas multilingualism is associated with underdevelopment and poverty, and seen as a recipe for a fractious Tower of Babel.

Government agencies themselves seem to prefer English for practical reasons. For instance, in 1996, English accounted for 87% of all the speeches made in Parliament. Legislation will remain in English and Afrikaans, while Hansard, the parliamentary record of debates, will be published in English with insets in the home languages used by MPs. The Ministry of Justice also plans to drop the use of Afrikaans in courts and retain only English due to lack of translators (*Rapport*). Even the document detailing the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Project), the transition government's platform, is only available in English.

An interesting point is that Blacks perceive English in a favourable light. Schools for Blacks were founded by British missionaries who sought to mould black Christian communities along European lines. In spite of this imperialistic content, and even though ESSAs belonged to the racial oligarchy, English carries notions of learning and development, not oppression. Black élites have always used English: as early as 1912, the South African Congress of Natives, soon to become the ANC, used it as its language of communication. Most of its founders were educated in mission schools, and many ANC leaders went to the College of Fort Hare, for a long time the only Black higher education institution, which provided education in English. During the apartheid period, English became an instrument of protest, whereas Afrikaans was identified with the racist regime. Emotionally, English also held a positive value, enhanced from the late 1960s onwards, as a window onto the outside world. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Black Consciousness thinkers saw English as the best medium to carry an efficient struggle, by attracting foreign attention and support. AZAPO (Azanian's People Organisation), an ultra-left ANC splinter group with Africanist leanings, even advocated the use of English as a unifying language for Blacks.

Beyond all the emotive aspects of the language issue, most Blacks see English as a tool for a better life, albeit perhaps as a necessary evil, to the point that its instrumental function seems to supersede all other considerations. Back in 1971, a poll revealed that 88.5% of 200 Soweto Standard 10 pupils preferred to receive education in English rather than in Afrikaans or in the Bantu languages (Goguel 22). In 1979, the apartheid regime extended the teaching of English from the fifth year of schooling to the whole country in Black schools. Unfortunately, the Black youth of the late 1970s started boycotting schools so that proficiency in English dropped dramatically: a survey showed that by 1986 65% of the Black adult population could not speak it. Today, it is very likely that, given the right to

choose the language of education of their children, most parents will pick English as a second or third language after the mother tongue. They want their children to achieve higher social status and see English as a means to an end. Many of them 'send their children to schools where English... is the language of instruction (because of) how empowering fluency in English is' (Kaschula and Anthonissen 59).

The Domination of English and Unilingualism: Redressing Imbalances

However, some have come to consider that the *laissez faire* option was just renewed Eurocentric colonialism and the hegemony of English potentially dangerous. As has been stressed above, a language can spread only if it is felt as necessary by its users. But if political, educational and economic structures remain as they are and 'without an effective policy for implementation, the multilingual policy enshrined in the constitution will remain a token gesture. The ultimate effect will be that the hegemony of English will proceed unchecked' (Kashula and Anthonissen 107). In fact, a growing number of Black scholars, many with Africanist background, see English as a problem for the democracy-building process, not as a solution. According to Dr Neville Alexander, a former Robben Islander and ANC activist, probably South Africa's most famous language planner, whose writings in the 80s helped frame the modern language issue, especially in the field of education, 'left to itself, the present situation would simply doom us to repeating the same mistakes so many other African and post-colonial states have made. We would end up with a small English-fluent élite for whom their proficiency in this world language would amount to cultural capital, enabling them to get the best jobs and enjoy the perks of high status while the rest of the population is insulated from all the power positions and social processes, thus making a mockery of development and democracy' (Alexander).

Alexander insists on the need for language planning – 'a government-authorized, long term sustained and conscious effort to alter a language itself or to change a language's functions in a society for the purpose of solving communications problems – (DACST 7) to redress the imbalances created by apartheid. Language planning also entails the symbolical recognition of the cultural assets of each community. The ANC's official position is that the market alone cannot address past cultural inequalities and that government must intervene. Hence the recognition of 11 official languages (the mother tongues of 98% of the population) as one of the six

founding provisions of the 1996 Constitution, and the inclusion of language rights into the Bill of Rights. Other sections of the Constitution refer to the necessity of respecting language diversity and of not discriminating against any language in any situation, particularly in the fields of justice, education and culture.

As can be seen, the case for linguistic diversity did not arise from the mere wish to respect all cultures. In December 1995, Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology BS Ngubane announced the creation of Langtag (Language Plan Task Group) to prepare a language plan for South Africa. Initially, Langtag, composed of eight renowned language scholars and chaired by Neville Alexander, intended to work on establishing equal opportunities for Black languages. But it turned out that its proceedings were dictated by a wish to counteract the domination of English, as can be inferred from its report which was tabled in Parliament in August 1996: the task, it says, 'is truly mountainous. It is no less than challenging the hegemony of English' (11). The lack of financial backing, material obstacles and an entangled linguistic situation meant a letdown in that area of government and a soft acceptance of English domination as 'during the past months, it has become clear that there is a definite tendency to unilingualism in our country' (DACST, 1).

Among Langtag's main concerns were 'the drift towards unilingualism in the Public Service despite the constitutional commitment to multilingualism' (31), which meant that many public services were not available to African language speakers, the 'blatant hegemony' of English on public service television, a tendency to use only English at meetings, including Cabinet meetings, at national and local government levels, and 'a questionable commitment to multilingualism in the ranks of the political leadership of the country' (27). 'At national level, the official attitude is clearly pro-English and... interpreting services in Parliament are for practical purposes limited to English and Afrikaans' (15).

Acknowledging the fact that the status and functions of a language are symptoms of its power, the report recommends that the Bantu languages 'be used in high-status functions such as parliamentary debates, languages of learning and teaching in all phases of education, from pre-school up to the universities and the technikons, in the print and electronic media and for domestic (national, regional and local) business transactions' (12). Political, economic and cultural leaders should be made to use African languages on important occasions to set the right example. It is

an established fact that community and national leaders play a prescriptive role for the population. In January 1998, Nelson Mandela used Xhosa to answer questions in English during a live interview on SABC3, an allegedly all-English public channel. Beyond the symbolical aspect, there is the belief that a Bantu language can be used for a major event, which is the case whenever the head of state speaks to the nation.

As regards public and government services, Langtag called for the drafting of 'guidelines for all public servants to use languages other than English on a regular basis in national, provincial and local Government forums'. The report wanted to compel private employers to consider 'proficiency in an African language as a criterion for employment'. This goes further than mere affirmative action: being Black would not be the only reason for getting a job anymore. Such measures would, at long last, empower the Black population psychologically, the important point being that people are useful because they *are* proficient in Tsonga, Zulu or Ndebele, not that they are useless because they don't master English.

Yet the need for the government to prove that things are changing does not preclude the implementation of essential long term measures regarding education and literacy. By 1994 80% of Black South Africans and about 40% of whites could not read or compute at a Standard 5 level (WMG). In the South African educational system, literacy in the mother tongue is 'highly correlated with proficiency in English and basic numeracy'. For that same reason, a high proportion of those who are proficient in English are literate. On the reverse, literacy is absolutely necessary for a language to be empowered. In modern highly computerized societies, a language that has no well-established written form cannot become a necessary instrument and is therefore doomed to go under or become extinct. Many Blacks suffer from double illiteracy: they can neither speak the vehicular language, English, nor write in their own mother tongue.

As South Africans are gradually discovering and accepting, they belong to a country with many cultural identities where each individual has probably several identities. One of the paths to follow is multilingual education. Dr Alexander champions 'additive bilingualism' which involves building on a child's home language. 'Under conditions where there is no English-speaking environment you have to use the home language, bring in English as soon as possible and build on the child's actual understanding of concepts in the home language' (CT). English would not be considered as an enemy but as a stepping stone and a needed trans-cultural device. 'Sus-

tainable development will only be possible if education occurs via African languages together with English at all levels' (DACST 18). For Blacks, to go beyond four years of education means learning a foreign language. But when children drop out and stop acquisition, an all too frequent situation, they lose all chances to climb up the social ladder.

Another set of reasons for the domination of English pertains to the characteristics of the Bantu languages. The Bantu languages are territorialized in fairly strict borders, with the exception of the Johannesburg area, whereas English and Afrikaans are spoken throughout the country and more importantly in all the cities. In addition, Bantu languages have almost no written tradition. As Canadian linguist W. Mackey wrote: 'The lack of standardization jeopardizes the potential status of a language' (Mackey 52). The Bantu languages are in need of written material (dictionaries, schoolbooks) as well as well-trained technical experts (DACST 13).

Finally, such a policy requires enormous sums of money and many point out that it would be less costly, and more efficient, to let English dominate. Librarians in the Western Cape complain about a lack of Xhosa books, but 'publishers are reluctant to publish Xhosa books because they are not commercially viable and they won't publish 300 books, say, just for library services' (CT). Since culture has become a product that is sold and bought, its content depends on profitability' (Mackey 52). Langtag rejected the cost argument because of its defeatist outlook. It is very critical of the Constitution which claims that 'questions of usage, practicality and expense' must be taken into account (8-3). Eventually, this is what 'leads to unilingualism and the unacceptable subordination of marginalised groups under a dominant group which we can no longer tolerate in a democratic South Africa' (DACST 23).

The success of the state language policy will depend on the money available, on the unyielding will of the government, on the commitment of the teachers, workers and of the population as a whole to accept and promote all the languages of South Africa. Most of all, such a policy needs time. As for the English culture in South Africa it stands in a fairly ambiguous position because it is often used, as by the national media, to convey a trans-cultural image of South African society.

There is also a danger of playing English against the other languages. Fortunately, having twenty or so different idioms might not necessarily lead to anarchy or impede upon the rise of a single unified nation. 'Language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn a

language... Print is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se... In a world in which the nation state is the overwhelming norm, all this means that nations can now be imagined without linguistic communality...' (Anderson 1985 134–135). If South Africa intends to follow such a path to unity, it will have to handle the contradictions between the need for a powerful English language and the vital social and cultural position of all the other languages – Afrikaans, Bantu and Indian.

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Note

1. Dominique Darbon of the Centre d'Etudes d'Afrique Noire in Bordeaux has pointed out that the 'transition period' has something 'magical' about it but that if it is to be fruitful it has to bring opponents around a negotiating table in order to exchange their points of views – make 'transactions' and get things going.