

# Language Maintenance in South Africa: Hoarding Dreams, Hiding the Springs of Identity?

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## Introduction\*

The questions surrounding the complex and often emotionally charged relationship between language and identity, can be approached from a number of different perspectives. Such questions can be treated to philosophical investigation, to sociological investigation, to educational or psychological investigation, as well as to linguistic (or to be more precise, sociolinguistic) investigation. It is the latter perspective I wish to adopt in this paper, taking the views of Edwards (1985) on the language/identity relation as a point of departure and exploring, albeit tentatively, the implications of these views for the debate on the continued co-existence of the languages of South Africa.

It will be argued that the economic and social realities of the South African situation make it likely that the indigenous languages such as Afrikaans and Zulu will eventually be supplanted by English. Although these languages may vanish as markers of group identity, the identity itself can be maintained should the group so wish

## Ethnic and National Identity

It is necessary to delineate the field somewhat. Reference to identity is specifically to *group identity*, comprising the two powerful elements of *ethnicity* and *nationalism*. Edwards (1985:10) defines ethnic identity as '... allegiance to a group ... with which one has ancestral links'. He points out

that some sense of a group boundary must exist which can be sustained by shared objective markers such as geography, religion, race, gender or language. Group boundaries can also be marked by more subjective attachments of a symbolic nature, usually from a shared past, such as eating habits. Steyn (1980:96) makes the same point when he states that a person is a member of a particular ethnic group partly through birth and partly through inheritance.

Edwards (1985:12) refers to the work of Smith (1971) for the conceptual link that enables him to regard nationalism or national identity as an extension of ethnicity. Added to the belief in shared characteristics (the inheritance), that characterizes ethnicity, nationalism also incorporates a desire for political autonomy. Nationalism, therefore, is seen as ‘... ethnicity with a desire for self-government ...’. As a doctrine, nationalism makes the assumption that the linguistic criterion is the most important one in delineating the nation that desires political autonomy. In this context language is raised from *a* marker to *the* marker of ‘groupness’.

Criticism of both ethnicity and nationalism abounds in the literature. However, whatever misgivings can be brought in against ethnicity (such as that it is regressive in nature and promotes particularism—Porter (1972) and Vallee (1981)) and against nationalism (such as that it constitutes a threat to individual rights and interests—Orwell 1961), they remain vital forces in most societies, including our own.

## **The Language/Identity Link and Language Maintenance**

It is widely accepted that the central function of language is to facilitate communication. Edwards (1977, 1984) points out that such communication is an ingroup phenomenon. It is only within a group sharing the same language that the specific language serves a communicative function. He identifies a second, exclusive, function of language, viz. that of concealment. In this function language serves to protect group distinctiveness by excluding any non-member of the group from participation. According to Steiner (1975:233) this represents a group effort to prevent ‘... hoarded dreams, patents of life ... (being) taken across the frontier’. Separate languages enable the group to hide its ‘springs of identity’ (Steiner 1975:232). Language therefore not only marks group identity, but also protects it.

It comes as no surprise that language is commonly held to be inseparable from group identity: a threat to the one constitutes a threat to the other. However, Edwards (1985:18,47-85) argues convincingly on the basis of 47 language contexts around the world, that history provides ample

evidence to the contrary. Language is not essential to group identity. There is no intrinsic link between language and identity and group identity can and does survive the demise of a definitive language. Edwards (1985:62) refers to Irish as a case in point. Only about 3% of the population now use the language in any regular way, yet the Irish as a group seem not to have lost their national identity, but to have enshrined it in English.

Conversely, Steyn (1980:98) argues that the ethnic revival of the past two decades could lead to the growth of declining minority languages. But in this regard Edwards (1985:115) sounds a note of caution: greater ethnic *visibility* because of increased societal tolerance of diversity and increased social mobility of ethnic groups should not be mistaken for a 'new ethnicity'. He finds it highly unlikely that minority (used in the sense of being of minor status) languages will show a sustained growth. The economic necessities that govern modern societies require '... a need and a willingness to make alterations in those visible markers of groupness which might compromise chances of success ...'. Language, per excellence, is a visible marker that can severely affect the individual's economic mobility in modern society. Speakers of Zulu or Afrikaans, for example, need English to make any headway in the South African job market. The more private and symbolic markers such as eating habits, can be retained without the danger of community censure, for the group identity to survive.

## **The South African Situation**

In South Africa today the language/identity link is of special relevance. In this rapidly changing socio-political environment, visible markers of identity such as language will be highly susceptible to change. The most prominent sociolinguistic debate at present concerns the future of Afrikaans. Sociolinguistically speaking, there is every reason to be concerned about the long term prospects of Afrikaans. But there is also every reason to be concerned about the future of Zulu, Xhosa and the rest of our eleven official languages, except English, and a number of others besides, such as the Indian languages. These are all languages in close contact with an economically strongly dominant world language, which is a dangerous situation for any language to find itself in, according to the data presented by Edwards (1985).

A number of interrelated social phenomena have led to the continued existence of these languages up to now. Steyn (1980:180-230) discusses, for example, the influence of favourable demographic processes on the survival of Afrikaans after the second Anglo-Boer War. Prabhakaran (1992:485ff.) argues that the Group Areas Act of the apartheid political dispensation

contributed in no small measure to the unusually slow tempo of language shift from the Indian languages to English. One of the most significant factors in the continued existence of Afrikaans, and also some of the other African languages such as Zulu, has been the link between these languages and the identity of their speakers. Steyn (1980:182) formulates it as follows for Afrikaans:

It was fortunate for Afrikaans that the Afrikaner nationalism was language directed ever since the First Language Movement. In times in which nationalism flourished, Afrikaans was advantaged by this<sup>1</sup>.

(It can be argued of course that this link between Afrikaans and Afrikaner nationalism held but a short term advantage for the language. In the long term, the negative attitudes generated towards the language as a result of this link have severely damaged its chances of survival.)

In the evolution of a new South African society, however, the multitude of languages spoken here may in the long run have no basis for continued existence. On a pragmatic level there is certainly no justification for the retention of so many languages. Communication could probably be greatly enhanced if the number of distinct languages in circulation were reduced, not to mention the economic advantages of such a development. Modernization worldwide promotes a language shift in the direction of the international languages. The reason for nonetheless maintaining the number of languages that we have in South Africa, is closely linked to the language-identity relationship.

In this regard the 'survival of Afrikaans' debate is of particular interest:

- (i) The view that Afrikaans is an essential component of Afrikaner identity and that survival of the one is inextricably linked to survival of the other, underlies much of the debate. This is reflected in media slogans such as 'Een ding is seker: raak aan sy taal en jy raak aan die Afrikaner' (*Huisgenoot* 4 Aug. 1994).
- (ii) The arguments put forth by those wishing to 'save' Afrikaans reflect an interesting paradox. On the one hand prominent academics have been arguing recently that for Afrikaans to survive, it will have to become less exclusive, less the property of the white Afrikaner. The language must be 'democratized'. In loosening the link between the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner identity, both can be maintained. Rightwing Afrikaners, on the other hand, in arguing for a 'volkstaat', maintain that the only chance of

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<sup>1</sup> Dit was 'n geluk vir Afrikaans dat die Afrikanernasionalisme sedert die Eerste Taalbeweging taalgerig was. In tye waarin die nasionalisme opgebloeit het, het Afrikaans die voordelige gevelge daarvan ondervind.

saving Afrikaans in the long term lies in strengthening the link between the language and the Afrikaner identity in a delimited geographical area.

For all this talk of identity, discussions of the future South African language scene have taken little cognisance of research into the language-identity link. The focus has been on a short term scenario reflecting a rather myopic vision of the future of the languages of South Africa.

## **A Historical Perspective**

A historical approach to exploring the role of identity in language maintenance, language shift and language death in the South Africa of tomorrow, offers a new perspective. Drake (1984), in investigating these phenomena in the USA, observed that '... the best predictor of future social behaviour is past social behaviour ...'. His sentiments are echoed by those of Edwards (1985:47):

... what people have done are likely to be useful not only in determining what they will probably continue to do, but also in ascertaining what their desires and needs are in linguistic (and other) matters.

It is my assumption that an assessment of the local linguistic scene has much to benefit from an historical awareness of the situation elsewhere in the world.

The first lesson to be learnt from Edwards' analyses of the survival history of languages around the globe is that group continuity or identity can survive the most radical social changes if its maintenance is desired by group members themselves. This does not mean that such an identity will not alter under social pressures like urbanisation, modernisation and social access. Edwards (1985:96f) points out that if pressures are persistent enough, changes in identity occur as a rule. The fluidity of identity, he says, allows group continuity in the midst of such change. It could be argued that the Afrikaner is in fact moving in the direction of such an altered identity with many young urban South Africans adamant that they are Afrikaners without subscribing to the traditional values associated with this identity. Although changed, the identity itself will persist.

The visible markers of the group identity like language, however, are highly susceptible to altered environments. In response to social pressures, these markers tend to disappear. They disappear faster and more completely than those markers that are intangible. The second lesson that history teaches then, is that language shift from one language to another and the resultant loss of the original language under social, political and especially economic

pressure is the rule, not the exception. Pinker (1994:259) refers to estimates by the linguist Michael Krauss that between 3,600 and 5,400 languages, as many as 90% of the world's total, are threatened with extinction in the next century. Only about 600 languages worldwide are reasonably safe by dint of the sheer number of their speakers. Taking a long enough perspective, virtually all groups have language shift somewhere in their past. In South African history the shift from Dutch to Afrikaans is but one case in point. Edwards (1985:62) presents evidence to suggest that the communicative and symbolic aspects of language are separable during periods of change. The latter can continue to exercise a role in group identity in the absence of the former. To this day many Afrikaans families who do not know a word of Dutch say grace at table in Dutch. Most English mother tongue speakers of Indian origin, retain an accent from their language of descent, although two generations removed from that language.

What are the implications of this for the present South African situation? With English dominating the higher functions such as those of the state, the law, the media and education, the economic and social empowerment for the greater part of the population lie with English. Coupled to the climate of radical social change triggered by radical political change, the scene is set for language shift and consequent language death in the long term. The timescale of two to three generations must be stressed. Groups can be expected to resist change and may do so for some time, without great disadvantage. The stronger the language-identity link, the stronger this resistance will be. But with social pressures persistent and strong enough, it would be truly a remarkable phenomenon for shifts not to occur. In South Africa they are already in progress. For the Indian languages the shift in the direction of English is so far advanced that there are no longer mother tongue speakers of the original languages around. For Afrikaans, Zulu and the other indigenous languages this shift has only just begun. To see this, it is only necessary to list the signals of language shift in progress. Steyn (1980:310) provides such a list, discussing its implications for Afrikaans. I wish to highlight only three of these signs for the South African linguistic situation.

### **The Signs of Language Shift**

Bilingualism is more often than not a precursor to dominant language monolingualism. Bilingualism can be a stable condition for a longer or shorter period of time, as it has been with respect to Afrikaans/English for close on fifty years. However, as Edwards (1985:72) points out:

The rule of the day here is ... pragmatic: people do not maintain two languages for ever, when one is sufficient in all contexts.

When a language has no more monoglots, language shift is in progress. One would be hard-pressed to find an Afrikaans monoglot and, especially in the cities, indigenous language/English bilingualism is widespread and ever spreading mainly because finding a job without English is almost impossible.

A lack of transmission of the original language to the younger generation is another sign of language shift in progress. This usually represents a pragmatic decision in which another variety is seen as more important for the future. It is a spreading phenomenon for Afrikaans-speaking parents to send their children to English medium schools. Many children of prominent speakers of the Cape Coloured dialect like the poet Adam Small, no longer use Afrikaans and in turn raise their children in English. As regards Zulu children, many urban schools that cater mainly for these children report a growing number of pupils who no longer speak sufficient Zulu to pass it as a first language school subject. This seems to be a source of shame and is often vigorously denied by school principals, possibly because the language is so closely linked to Zulu identity. As one school principal put it succinctly and firmly in personal communication: 'A Zulu speaks Zulu'.

A third sign of language shift is a lack of an urban concentration of speakers. This differs from region to region in South Africa, but in Natal for example the large cities are English. To this any person will attest who has tried to find a greeting card, a calendar or a paperback in any South African language other than English at a newsstand in Durban or Pietermaritzburg.

That the shift for South African languages would be in the direction of English, was predictable. Throughout the world most people are committed to maximising material wellbeing through upward mobility. The economic basis of group dynamics has been stressed in much of the literature critical of ethnic and cultural pluralism (Patterson 1977, Stein & Hill 1977, Steinberg 1981). In South Africa English opens the doors to education, to jobs, to social advancement and to the wider world. It is *the* prestige language. Such pragmatic considerations require choices from ethnic group members. Edwards (1985:50-52) points out that his research as well as a number of other studies indicate that most members of such groups are willing to 'compromise' by voluntarily giving up the visible markers of ethnic identity. This has led to the view that languages are not murdered by other languages (as often claimed by Afrikaans speakers with reference to English), rather they commit suicide. In linguistic suicide, however, there is always a significant other language which creates the pressures, without any intent being implied, leading to language shift and decline. In South Africa, this language is English.

So language shift in South Africa is under way. The good news for many groups here is the finding of Edwards (1985), referred to earlier, that

should any of the groups involved wish to maintain group solidarity, the group identity will survive. Afrikaans, for example, although perhaps not eventually retained for communicative purposes, may retain a strong symbolic value in an evolutionary group identity. This has happened in the Indian community. The language in the direction of which the shift has occurred may in turn carry features that serve as marker of group identity: Indian English being a case in point.

### **The Language/Identity Link in Inhibiting Language Shift**

There are factors that retard language shift. Holmes (1992:70) points out that the stronger a language is valued as a marker of identity, the more resistant that language is to shift. This would be a factor in any shift from Afrikaans or Zulu to English. Also, where a group is large enough to form a large speech community and is reasonably isolated from other speech groups, e.g. where the community in question is a rural one, there is more chance of short term language maintenance. Factors such as these will inhibit language shift in South Africa in the short term, but nowhere in the world have such factors prevented shift in the long term. As indicated, the language-identity link is already loosening for many Afrikaans speakers who believe that the language should be democratized. Ironically, the end of apartheid is leading to a breakdown of the group concentration and isolation needed for language maintenance.

What about active efforts to protect and promote a language? The efforts of *Die Stigting vir Afrikaans* fall into this category. In pointing out that Afrikaans is at least fighting for its continued existence (note for example the outcry surrounding decisions of companies such as Toyota and Coca Cola to abandon the use of Afrikaans in packaging and promotion as well as the controversy concerning television time allocated to Afrikaans), Du Plessis (quoted in DSA 48: March/April 1994) laments the lack of such action from the side of the ethnic languages. This may be a rather paternalistic attitude. If a people chooses to switch to a mainstream language that promises economic and social advancement, what gives an outside group the right to prescribe that they should not do so? The voluntary element in language shift further entails that the chances of success for active intervention on behalf of a language, are in any case negligible. It has proved difficult to interest ordinary group members themselves in language maintenance efforts. They may be supportive of the ideals, but experience has taught that in practice they simply continue to follow the upwardly mobile course. Language revival efforts have often led to a growth in the number of people knowing the language. Such 'secondary bilinguals' have,



however, proved to be less vital elements for the continued life of a language than are native speakers (Edwards 1985:72). So much for the very popular sentiment in educational circles that the future of Afrikaans lies with its black speakers. Language decline is only one variable in an interrelated combination of other important social phenomena. Attempts to intervene on behalf of one feature alone is not likely to succeed.

## **Education in Identity and Language Maintenance**

Bilingual education in the USA is a particularly fascinating arena when considering the role of the school in group and language maintenance. From the rhetoric surrounding bilingual education in this context (Wolfson 1989:231ff.), it is clear that, as in our own context, education has been seized upon as the main support system for groups and languages perceived to be at risk. But the historical record, according to Edwards (1985:136), especially in the USA, shows a gradual decline in the desire for programmes in and on ethnic languages on the part of the beneficiaries themselves. It has been reported at various recent conferences that parents in South Africa themselves are strongly resisting schooling through medium of the indigenous languages, seeing it as a continued effort to disempower their children. It appears that, although schools should respect and illuminate diversity, it is not their task to preserve and transmit specific cultures. The American experience has further taught that maintenance bilingual programmes are most unlikely to significantly affect group identity. In fact, Edwards (1985:118-138) argues that such programmes may actually damage children's sense of identity. South African educationalists should learn from this experience.

## **Conclusion**

The historical evidence seems to indicate that ordinary group members adapt to changing circumstances in a non-arbitrary manner. Realizing that change is required for pragmatic reasons, they retain what is possible to retain without active and essentially artificial policies of support. As Edwards (1985:165) puts it:

If, in fact, given markers of group identity are seen to require support, this probably indicates that they cannot be retained anyway ..

Few areas have the emotional impact of language decline and death, but

change and transition are social realities for most people. The alternative is a static situation which very few have been prepared to accept. Those arguing for maintenance and preservation must ask themselves whether they really want to foster the exclusive role of languages in a society in transition. Linguistically speaking, the cost of the transition in South Africa will only be determined in two to three generations. Hale (1992:6) points out that the price paid for the loss of a language is high:

The loss of a language is part of the more general loss being suffered by the world, the loss of diversity in all things.

But in the situation under discussion it will probably turn out that, to quote Edwards (1985:97) out of context, '... the cost is less than that which would ensue if changes were not made'.

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