

Clearing Spaces: Multilingualism in a Multicultural Context

*Multilingualism in a Multicultural Context:
Case Studies on South Africa and Western Europe.*
Edited by Guus Extra and Jeanne Maartens
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This book of sociolinguistic case studies edited by Guus Extra (Research Group on Language and Minorities, Tilburg University) and Jeanne Maartens (Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands, University of Natal, Durban) is most probably one of the most important academic interventions of 1997—i.e. as a bottom-up intervention and not a top-down one (cf. Broeder & Extra p. 155). Pioneering as it is, it provides a wealth of information ranging from historical factors (including migratory realities), current (and past) constitutional/policy decisions and available statistical and demographic information from South Africa and Western Europe, through sociolinguistic case studies as such (with which the book is primarily concerned), to numerous interpretations of this research and suggestions for further research, language policy formulation and constructive engaging of the possibilities open to languages in a multicultural context.

Variously pointing to the hegemonic role Afrikaans played as implicated medium for apartheid (cf. Maartens pp. 29-33; Zungu p. 47 for example), it also does not endorse an uncritical attitude towards English as medium of instruction for various reasons. In the context of the disjunction between the South African Constitution (which recognises eleven official languages) and governance structure practices (which seems to favour English), it points to challenges and provides different options of how to address this problematic. The book's cross-national or rather, cross-continental nature is its strong point and prevents the debate's silting up behind historical politicised battle lines. It opens up a space in terms of which the main challenge—as captured in the title—can be dealt with responsibly, realistically and pro-actively.

If I must abstract from the book three currently relevant issues, they are: 1) the antinomy between the South African constitution's provision for eleven official languages and current language practices in society broadly speaking; 2) the constructive possibilities to be gained from home language as well as multilingual instruction; and 3) the various possible models of multilingual research in a multicultural context for purposes of language policy formulation and practices facilitating equal social participation (pre-empting 'xenophobia, discrimination, and sometimes brutal racism', Extra & Vallen pp. 174f).

I

In the context of the mismatch between language policy and language practice, one of the main concerns raised is the 'strongly dominant role' of English in governance structures, education and the media (Maartens p. 25). Even though English is a minority language—with only 9% and 16% mother tongue speakers in South Africa generally speaking and in KwaZulu-Natal more particularly; cf. McDermott p. 106; Maartens p. 23)—Lydia McDermott (p. 105) points out that especially upwardly mobile black South Africans view it as the gateway to 'selfempowerment, upward-mobility, sophistication and learnedness'. She importantly analyses this 'myth' in terms of its 'hegemonic dominance' and 'subversive effects' (McDermott pp. 105ff, 110ff). One of the important points on this issue in her overview of 'views of "others" on the mythology', is Njabulo Ndebele's implicit argument that South Africans have not yet started to appreciate 'the immense freedom of choice before them' [in the new dispensation] and Neville Alexander's that 'African languages can be as powerful as English' (McDermott pp. 115f). This latter view is importantly supported by J. Keith Chick's (pp. 91ff) excellent setting-specific interactional study on the relationship between English and isiZulu (which may also be true of minority languages). If the off-setting of English as 'language of liberation' during the apartheid years to current inconsistencies between the Constitution and language practices are not heeded, McDermott (pp. 111f, 117) suggests that African mother tongue speakers follow *Afrikaans Language Movement* strategies (which originated in the face of Milnerist 'cultural-imperialist policies' and practices; cf. Maartens pp. 28f).

Within the current impasse brought about by the prevalence of English in society, Phyllis Jane Zungu addresses the 'Status of Zulu in KwaZulu-Natal' by analysing isiZulu as first, second and third language in education; code-switching, code-mixing and language shift at work in modern isiZulu and makes some recommendations. Important suggestions address the need for professionals to learn isiZulu (for obvious reasons), policy decisions which require Afrikaans and English speakers (especially educators) to learn isiZulu and the importance of language as medium of historical, cultural, literature and environmental translation in a multilingual society. Pro-active

steps by especially Afrikaans and English speakers may lay to rest suspicions that 'multilingualism' is just another cover for 'apartheid maintenance' (Zungu pp. 46ff) she reasons.

Other case studies on the languages in KwaZulu-Natal include those by Anita de Villiers (Afrikaans), Varijakshi Prabhakaran (Indian languages) and Peter Broeder, Guus Extra and Jeanne Maartens (languages in the Durban Region). Whereas some (majority and minority) language communities do not see their home languages as part of the core values of their culture and identity (cf. Broeder & Extra on Dutch in The Netherlands and abroad, p. 155), this is not so amongst [at least some] Afrikaans speaking South Africans (as well as the Welsh, the Irish, the Francophone Canadians, the Flemish-Speaking Belgians, p. 71). In this context, De Villiers' helpful case studies of Afrikaans in KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa more broadly speaking, points to and further advocates 'additive multilingualism' (isiZulu-Afrikaans for example, and *visa versa*) in 'creating a multilingual society' (pp. 71f).

Varijakshi Prabhakaran (pp. 76ff) overviews the historical factors which lead to people of Indian descent representing close to twenty Indian languages in South Africa. Of these, only five remain: Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu, 'plus Sanskrit as sacred scriptural language'. Pointing to the shift towards English within the Indian community, she nevertheless detects a current 'revival of interest among the younger Indian generation in their linguistic and cultural heritage'. This is mainly due to 'various socio-economic, religio-cultural and political reasons' (Prabhakaran p. 89).

As concluding study of the first section in the book (mainly focused on KwaZulu-Natal), the 'Durban [primary school] Language Survey' by Peter Broeder, Guus Extra and Jeanne Maartens (pp. 121ff) revealed that pupils bring many more languages to the classroom than many educators are often aware of. In the light of the prevalence of English in many classrooms, the survey also showed that pupils from minority languages prefer instruction in their first or home language—suggesting that 'the education authorities are on the wrong track with the current move towards English as the medium of instruction' (Broeder, Extra & Maartens pp. 129f). In the context of isiZulu being the majority language in KwaZulu-Natal (with 80% mother tongue speakers in KwaZulu-Natal, cf. Maartens p. 23), many a poor academic performance in this province may be attributed to isiZulu speaking pupils having to study in a foreign language [and teachers teaching in one].

II

Reflecting on the constructive possibilities to be gained from home language as well as multilingual instruction, one of the images I toyed with and expanded as if in a picture, will most probably only remain a dream. Perhaps.

In this dream, I have seen the isiZulu speakers in KwaZulu-Natal (80% of the KZN population) as confident, on-top-of-the-game educationists, business persons, world-renowned scientists conducting themselves in isiZulu, making a crucial contribution to African and international knowledge. Such a dream, I think, would be any educationist's natural dream or rather expectation/purpose towards which to work. The question which does not seem to go away, however, is whether such a goal is realistically achievable when pupils and students have to learn, study and do research in a foreign language (whether 'South African English' or 'Zulu English').

This contradiction is amplified when its real implications are analysed.

It may be true that there are perceptions that English provides the gateway to the emerging black bourgeois bureaucratic class. The limited access to this class, however, will not only frustrate expectations but also prevent the pro-active development of a self-sustaining economy and society independent of state or outside funding. Moreover, if the critique of this state of affairs collapses into an antagonistic slinging match between this class and the English, Afrikaans and Indian bourgeois class(es), these middle and upper classes will be using their rhetoric just to justify their hegemonies, irrespective of whether they achieved it 'legitimately' or not. The result? The majority of the population will remain excluded from improving their quality of life.

Other real alternatives⁶ would be to 1) not enforce language policy and to allow a certain degree of freedom to education institutions; 2) enforce English usage on all levels of education and in all or some institutions; 3) to continue to develop the Sciences within Zulu culture and to present Zulu phrases/explanations alongside English as medium of instruction; 4) change the language of instruction to isiZulu on all levels of education in all or in some institutions; or 5) to allow for a mixture of these options.

Many issues and contradictions to all these options need to be pursued further. I mention only two. *Firstly*, if English retains its dominant position, the question then is whether the isiZulu lifeworld (which will be true for 80% of the KwaZulu-Natal population) will not remain barred from educational/information/knowledge/discourse development, i.e. except for the first few years of basic education. The contradiction, here, would be the enforcing of (a locally numerical) minority discourse ([in] English) onto a (locally numerical) majority. In the face of the spectre (as both threat and lure)

⁶ Such or similar alternatives echo one of the projects of The UNESCO Regional Office in Dakar. This project monitors the use of National Languages in Basic Education in Sub-Saharan Africa in four areas: 1) countries with language policies but which have not pushed seriously for the implementation of such policies; 2) countries in which national languages are taught only as subjects but not used as media of instruction; 3) countries in which national languages are used as media of instruction only in the early years of basic education; 4) countries in which basic education is entirely in indigenous languages (cf. *UNESCO Regional Office, Dakar* p.7).

of universalism—which may not deliver as much as it promises—the result would be a cultural particularism continuing to disadvantage isiZulu speakers or at least not create the space for the development of their full potential. The detrimental effects this would have on the development of the isiZulu lifeworld, speaks of itself.

Secondly, if options three and its harsher variant, option four, are seriously considered and implemented, this will mean the development of (scientific) discourse within isiZulu, to various degrees. For the lifeworld development of isiZulu speakers into scientific domains, this would appear crucial. It would mean that isiZulu may vitally contribute to an ownership model⁷ of knowledge/discourse including both production and consumerism of not only discourse but also products in the marketplace. As a start, it seems to me that option three must be engaged more vigorously. Initial indications are that such developments already exist (practised by numerous isiZulu teachers) and that the professional and education sector must seriously consider meeting the challenges posed by the proposals of Zungu (pp. 46ff).

In the spirit of *Multilingualism*, the ownership model will guard against a new particularist hegemony by also fostering the development of similar activities in other minority languages of KwaZulu-Natal. Moving along a different curve, Afrikaans as language (and its speakers)—seeing the degree to which it as language is positively perceived (cf. De Villiers 58ff)—must continue to free itself from concepts nationally and internationally not acceptable. (As was the case amongst educationists especially since Soweto 1976⁸.) This can be achieved by reaching out both locally and internationally. It is at precisely this juncture which I locate *Multilingualism* and for which it is to be applauded. Initiated by the Department of Afrikaans (University of Natal, Durban), it does not only reach out to the multilingual and multicultural plurality in South Africa (and KwaZulu-Natal); it also reaches out internationally.

This raises the question of foreign participation in research in Africa (and South Africa). To thoroughly research the ravages which Africa has been subjected to by the

⁷ The ownership model faces up to the real, embraces both production and consumerism and does not exclude multiplicity—contra the consumerism propagated (in and for former and neo-colonialist countries) by Zygmunt Bauman 1992. *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London & New York: Routledge. The 'ownership model' may be the alternative 'road' to the conflation of capitalism and socialism prevalent in these countries (cf. Bauman 1992:22-25;22). In this model, such countries are challenged to see their multilingualism as resource rather than 'problem'. They are challenged to put governance structures in place in their own countries as well as in former colonies which may facilitate the development of 'foreign' languages for the benefit of the people both in the 'home' countries and in the diaspora ones. In the isiZulu-English nexus, Britain is not absolved from this challenge.

⁸ The tradition (if we can call it that) of minority resistance within the Afrikaans speaking community (especially since 1948) still needs to be described/narrativised.

various colonialisms—mainly economically and culturally—much remains to be *done*. This is needed not so much to create objects of blame, foster a paralysing resentment or absolving one from responsible participation, I think. It is rather needed to prevent and block neo-colonial forms of extraction and exploitation. In this, it seems to me, *Multilingualism* has succeeded importantly. The participation of the University of Tilburg researchers in the research here presented does not only make (both theoretical and practical) contributions locally but also internationally, i.e. to other situations where one is confronted with contradictions concerning the status of what may be termed, generally speaking, minority discourse. Concerning Afrikaans as discourse, it also means that its reaching out to the country and language of origin will provide liberatory possibilities in the spirit of *Multilingualism*.

In addition to English as avenue to contribute to international knowledge, further South African-Netherlands participation could, in the spirit of *Multilingualism*'s approach, prove relevant. Similarly co-operative research could operate along language trajectories opened up by the focus of the Research Group on Language and Minorities on Arabic, Berber, Hindi and Turkish (cf. Broeder & Extra pp. 145ff for more language communities researched). The assertion of the realities of multilingualism in multicultural context, would guard against language as well as cultural particularism if not exclusivism. Similarly, it will create spaces for the constructive engagement and governance structure facilitation of the education and development possibilities which still lies dormant because minority languages are prevented from developing their lifeworld potential. Foreign country-South African participation may importantly contribute towards our reconstructive and development challenges and practices.

Multilingualism has opened the door to these and other issues not addressed here (cf. *Multilingualism* for more). In the spirit of El Aissati and Bos' (cf. p. 192) proposal, minority languages should not be viewed as home languages of and for ethnic minorities but as 'modern' languages which receive 'the same attention all other modern foreign languages get'. This has never been more true than now. In the multicultural context which is South Africa, for example, the resources minority languages offer—especially concerning the positive value access to such languages by and for non-mother tongue speakers may create within and for our country—need to be developed pro-actively. Stated differently: why can English speakers (in both South Africa and Britain) not study one of the other South African Languages; Afrikaans or Zulu speakers not Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu or Sanskrit; French or Dutch speakers not Arabic or Berber; etc.?

In the bottom-up approach which sees multilingualism as a 'resource' (and not a 'problem' as in top-down approaches; cf. Broeder & Extra p. 155) educators and pupils/students (as learners) alike, must realise the possibilities brought about by our

newly found freedom. It is hoped that more scholars will participate in such research, the debate, and crucially, the participative and constructive pro-active development of minority languages.

III

In a country which has been ravished by political and other hegemonic discourses, *Multilingualism*, especially as far as it presents us with case study approaches and case study data, has done scholarship an immense service. Even though it is true that any empirical study will always be discursively slanted, it is for us to evaluate the results (cf. my attempt under II above) or prove differently. Even so, the methods employed, especially as they attempt to move beyond existing 'census' and 'survey' type approaches, signal a desire to greater scientificity (cf. especially Maartens p. 15ff and Chick p. 91ff on this issue). To this purpose, each and every contribution provides a particular approach (with sample questionnaires and tables developed for interpretation and evaluation purposes) which may be used for similar studies, further developed and/or transcended by creating better ones. These comprise the perceptive treatment of existing census and demographic data, the pointing to gaps and how they may be transcended for policy formulation (Maartens pp. 15ff; De Villiers pp. 67ff; Prabhakaran pp. 87f; Broeder & Extra pp. 141; El Aissati & Bos pp. 180f; Van der Avoird pp. 197ff); the addressing of issues of first, second and third language learning (Zungu pp. 37ff; De Villiers pp. 61ff; Extra & Vallen pp. 165ff; Van der Avoird pp. 212ff); the study of code-switching, code-mixing, language shift and language change (Zungu pp. 44ff; Van der Avoird pp. 207ff; Backus & Boeschoten pp. 221ff); geolinguistic studies (De Villiers pp. 52ff); sociolinguistic profiling (De Villiers pp. 58ff; Prabhakaran pp. 77ff); sociolinguistic diversity studies (Broeder, Extra & Maartens pp. 121ff; Chick pp. 95ff); interactional studies (Chick pp. 91ff; El Aissati & Bos pp. 181ff); the de-mythising of a language (McDermott pp. 105ff); the development of multilingual teaching models and practices (Extra & Vallen pp. 170ff); the addressing of the education-employment nexus (El Aissati & Bos pp. 182ff); language variation studies (El Aissati & Bos pp. 184f); the study of the articulation of socio-economic and cultural status (Van der Avoird pp. 201ff).

Each of these areas of sociolinguistic research opens a space to research the real. Even though this notion has suffered much in philosophy and other social and human science reminiscences, *Multilingualism* succeeds in grappling with issues which some would claim still form part of the unthought of thought, the irrational of reason or the unconscious of consciousness. Even though its sociolinguistic tools will be further developed and gaps identified filled, it provides methods and procedures for empirical socio-linguistic research which importantly open up questions and procedures before which many remain stupefied.

IV

As evident from the case study research, minority language maintenance is a fact and the sooner educators and governance structures in both South Africa and Western Europe (or elsewhere) pro-actively facilitate and contribute to this state of affairs, the better it would be—not only to facilitate improved learning quality but even more, to create spaces for constructive contributions to science and development by and for all. My view is that hegemonies of whatever kind would only spell one of two alternatives: Babel or conflict.

In a different context, Zarathustra longed for man to be ‘delivered from revenge ... [a] bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after many storms’. *Multilingualism in a Multicultural Context*⁹ is such a bridge if not many bridges.

Drawing on internationally-recognised and constitutional indicatives, *Multilingualism*'s sociolinguistic case studies reveals a space where minority languages transcend narrow ethnic definition and political co-option. *Multilingualism* is a positive resource and anyone grappling with language policy formulation and its implementation (whether principals, teachers, governance officials), anyone participating in practices related to minority languages or the fact of multilingualism in a multicultural context, or anyone (researcher/student/learner) embarking on similar research projects cannot ignore it. In this context, I think Maartens' (p. 35) statement apt:

Only if leadership is seen to take pride in all South African languages; only if all schools value every child's mother tongue as a unique asset, offering multilingual options; and only if people are rewarded for their knowledge of a variety of languages in terms of jobs and status, can language practice eventually reflect language policy.

The contributors and editors must be congratulated for creating contextual effects and clearing spaces for not following idealised sociolinguistic trends but for constructively engaging the ‘indeterminacies, unevenness, diversity, tensions and struggle of real sociolinguistic orders’ (cf. Chick p. 91). Pro-actively, governance structures and education but also the media, business and private enterprise should participate. Research in the same pioneering spirit and which spans the net even wider (to cover socio-economic, religio-cultural and political spaces—amongst others—more explicitly) promises much.

⁹ The recognition of the fact that multiculturalism in South Africa is (re)presented in ‘a’ context, may lead to an interpretation conducive to an apartheid mentality. In such an interpretation, South Africa would constitute the or ‘a’ context, ‘multiculturalism’ would represent its cultural diversity and, if multilinguality would then be mapped over this one or single context refracted into its diversity of cultural enclaves, then, you would have a post-Apartheid apartheid situation. However, the constitution and this book's argument posit a different space—as is especially evident from my treatment of the book not only in sections I and III above but especially my evaluation in section II. It is for this reason that I find the book not to calcify in either race or class positions but to move into a space beyond such hegemonies.