

South Africa's National Language Policy Revisited: The Challenge of Implementation

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Introduction

Has South Africa's language policy achieved its goals as set out in Section 6 of the Constitution, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996)? The answer to this question is a complex one. On the one hand, the policy has raised awareness around people's language and cultural rights. It has also encouraged the concept of what Bishop Tutu refers to as 'unity in diversity' and has created an awareness of respect for fellow individual South Africans. This has allowed for a renewed sense of pride and identity. On the other hand, ten years on from independence, the policy has yet to manifest in a practical way in the real world of economics, education and so on. Even from a political point of view, the movement has been towards the greater use of English. Heugh (1999:70) paints a bleak picture when she states that although multilingualism is entrenched in the constitution '... the promise of a vibrant and linguistically diverse country looks disappointing'.

This article will daringly take a more optimistic tone, although I would agree with Heugh that in the last ten years of democracy, the implementation of multilingualism has been largely unsuccessful. It is also now recognized that for a nation such as South Africa to exist, much like that of Switzerland, for example, one does not need linguistic and cultural hegemony. Traveling though Switzerland one can hear varieties of French, Swiss-German, Romansh and Italian freely spoken, yet there is a sense of Swiss unity and identity which overrides these linguistic differences. Neville Alexander (2002:88) makes this point clear when he states that

... 'community of language' is not an 'essential attribute' of the nation. In other words, the crucial issue is the capacity of the citizens to communicate with one another effortlessly, regardless of the language in which they do so.

If one extrapolates from this, then one must assume that South Africans do not communicate with one another without effort. On the one hand, many South Africans do not have a good working knowledge of English, yet English has become entrenched as the language of politics, economy and trade. On the other hand, those who control the economy do so through the medium of English. This is indeed a dangerous situation which could lead to ethnic mobilization in the future. Language needs to be used in order to create greater 'intersection' between communities and thereby, greater economic parity between South Africans. (cf. Alexander 2002:88).

Chimhundu (1997:7), a Zimbabwean scholar, poses the following pertinent questions as far as language policy in Africa is concerned. It is these very questions which the government's new Implementation Plan, discussed in this article, seeks to address:

How can you guarantee democracy where the law of the country is not understood in the language of the people? How do you abide by what you do not know? How can you use information to which you only have limited access? How can you fully participate in anything, or compete, or learn effectively or be creative in a language you are not fully proficient or literate? Above all, how can a country develop its human resource base to full potential without the languages of the people?

Mutasa (2000:218) responds as follows to the above questions:

One asks such questions because it is no longer the time to preach about decolonising the mind, national consciousness and identity. These are givens. This epoch emphasis or focus should be placed on development and nation building which can only be achieved through access to information, grassroots participation and grassroots leadership.

Much lip service has been paid to the implementation of language processes in Africa. Perhaps with the exception of the development of Swahili and Afrikaans, Bamgbose (1991:111) rightly observed that no matter how good language policies are in Africa, they are characterized by, *inter alia*, '... declaration without implementation'. It is quite true that over the past decade, this has also been the case in South Africa. Indeed, this is true of the whole of Africa, where exoglossic languages have become the languages of power, with the exception of Tanzania where Swahili has been developed as a national language (cf. Kaschula, 1999). With sufficient political will, the new South African Implementation Plan may yet prove previous critics incorrect.

In line with the pledge made by the previous Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Minister Ben Ngubane, on the 30th March, 2004, the Department of Arts and Culture hosted the 'Advancing Multilingualism in a Democratic South Africa' conference. Dare one assume that the country stands at the threshold of a linguistic revolution, ten years after our first democratic elections which ensured the culmination of a political revolution?

This conference launched a series of language development initiatives, including a National Bursary Scheme for languages. This scheme is meant to encourage the study of indigenous languages, thereby opening up more career opportunities. A human language technology program was also established in order to ensure the technological advancement of our languages in such fields as law, commerce, science, politics and education. Finally, language research and development centers were established in order to ensure the equitable use of indigenous languages throughout the country, thereby opening up further career opportunities. In my opinion, these could be the beginnings of the cornerstones of implementation. However, one should add a cautionary note, in that the country held its third democratic elections on 14 April 2004. Language issues have always been given an emotive and political angle in South Africa. One can only hope that the language issue is not again being used as a political football. The current Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr Pallo Jordan, will need to give his support to the process of linguistic affirmation.

According to Stats in Brief 2002, Statistics South Africa, the percentages of mother tongue speakers of South Africa's languages are

represented in descending order of their speakers: IsiZulu: 24%, IsiXhosa: 18%, Afrikaans: 14%, Sepedi: 9%, English: 9%, Setswana: 8%, Sesotho: 8%, Xitsonga: 4%, Siswati: 2%, Tshivenda: 2%, IsiNdebele: 1%, Other: 1%. The 'other' category includes unspecified languages such as Portuguese, German, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil, Greek, Italian, Urdu, Dutch, French, Telugu and Chinese. (Implementation Plan, 2003:8).

These statistics mean that '... approximately 70 percent of all South Africans have an indigenous language as their mother tongue (MT), whereas 25 percent have English or Afrikaans as their MT ...' (Kaschula 1999:64). Logically, it would seem that the onus would be on the 25% of the population to acquire an indigenous language in order to enhance mutual intelligibility when it comes to language use and communication issues. However, with limited exceptions, the reverse seems to be true.

In November 2002, the previous Minister of Arts and Culture released the final draft of the National Language Policy Framework. This framework again outlined the historical context of language planning in South Africa, the key elements of the new policy, as well as the necessity to build human capacity through language. This framework also briefly set the scene as far as implementation strategies are concerned. These implementation strategies and structures have been further developed in the Implementation Plan, which is the focus of this article.

Let us now briefly look at the language structures which have been put in place over the last decade, and more especially over the last three years, in order to try and support what is outlined in Section 6 of the Constitution, namely, that all eleven of South Africa's official languages should enjoy equal rights and privileges. Furthermore, in view of the sense of exclusion between the languages, what is being done to create a politics of mutualisation in order to encourage a sense of social harmony between the peoples of South Africa? The successful implementation of the policy largely depends, in my opinion, on the structures and how they will operate, collaborate and be overseen.

This article then is not so concerned with the sociolinguistics of language policy and planning, and the now proven relationship between language, culture and thought, as discussed in my earlier works (see Kaschula and Anthonissen 1995; Kaschula 1999). Instead, it takes the debate one step further by discussing the problems and challenges facing the

implementation of the South African language policy. The existing policy has already allowed for structures to be created in order to ensure the implementation of multilingualism and the protection of individual language rights.

Current Language Structures

Let us now look at the Constitution as a language structure in itself. The Constitution emphasizes that all official languages ‘... must enjoy parity of esteem ...’ and be treated equitably, thereby enhancing the status and use of indigenous languages, with government taking ‘... legislative and other measures ...’ to regulate and monitor the use of disadvantaged indigenous languages.

Section 6 (2) requires mechanisms to be put in place to develop the indigenous languages. Section 6 (3) and (4) contain language-related provisions for national and provincial governments, whereby government departments must use at least two of the official languages. Other relevant provisions pertaining to language matters are made elsewhere in the Constitution. Section 9 (3) protects against unfair discrimination on the grounds of language, whilst sections 30 and 31 (1) refer to people’s rights in terms of cultural, religious, and linguistic participation and enjoyment. Section 35 (3) and (4) refer to the language rights of the arrested, detained and accused persons, with a particular emphasis on the right to a fair trial with proceedings conducted or interpreted into the language of that individual’s choice.

Section 6 (5) established The Pan South African Language Board (panSALB) in order to promote linguistic diversity further. One of its functions is to promote the use of South Africa’s language resources. It has also been mandated to oversee the development and use, not only of the official languages, but also the Khoe, Nama, and San languages, as well as South African Sign Language. panSALB is to also cultivate respect for the heritage languages spoken by some sections of our community, and for those languages that are used for religious purposes.

This controversial Board has acted as a ‘language watch-dog’. There have often been criticisms leveled at this board, for example, that it is not doing enough to help implement the language policy and that it is a waste of

tax-payers money. Nevertheless, in recent years, the Board has taken strides to become more visible, providing financial support for a number of projects aimed at increasing the visibility of African language usage in South Africa. An example would be when the previous Minister of Justice, Penuell Maduna, supported by four judges, suggested that only English be used within the Justice system. This suggestion was vigorously opposed by panSALB and together with public outcry, the proposal was withdrawn.

However, Heugh (1999:68-69) notes that the Board does not enjoy sufficient autonomy and independence in order to fulfill its functions. It also falls under the financial control of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC). Nevertheless, I would argue that it is now the DAC which is driving the Implementation Plan. It remains to be seen whether there will be successful collaboration between panSALB and the DAC. The real concern now is how successful implementation can be achieved rather than a discussion as to which angle it should come from.

Government's New Implementation Plan

Ten years after our democratic elections, structures have been put forward in order to implement language policy at government level. The Implementation Plan was approved on 12 February 2003, by Cabinet, at the highest level of politics. Three bodies have been outlined in the implementation plan, namely, Language Units, a National Language Forum as well as the South African Language Practitioners' Council.

It is further recognised that '... successful implementation will depend largely on collaboration with all national and provincial structures, as well as panSALB' (Implementation Plan, 2003:12). panSALB will remain a strategic partner of the Department of Arts and Culture, more particularly, the National Language Service unit (NLS) of the DAC, and that collaboration will be necessary in order to deal with language matters. These two bodies will facilitate the establishment of the required structures and play a coordinating role with regard to the identified mechanisms. One can only hope that successful and practical collaboration will in fact take place.

It is Government's responsibility to drive the implementation policy. In other words, once provincial and national government departments begin implementing the policy, then it is hoped that the private sector, e.g. the

banking sector and so on will follow this route. It is, however, a difficult task to get all politicians to buy into this process. The Western Cape Province has already established a multilingualism week. As part of this week, at a public ceremony attended by the media, each Minister of Education and Culture (MEC) was called upon to come forward and sign a pledge committing his or her department to the concept of multilingualism.

As mentioned earlier, the National Implementation Plan has already been approved at the highest level. It remains to be seen however, whether provincial members of Parliament, provincial legislatures and government departments will implement and buy into the policy Implementation Plan. According to the Director-General of Arts and culture, Dr RM Adam, in his foreword to the Implementation Plan:

Taking into account that the challenge for us, as Government, is to ensure delivery of an efficient service responsive to the needs of our citizens, and that language is the means through which we communicate with them, it is imperative that the Language Policy be implemented with urgency... in order to ensure that this vital Implementation Plan makes multilingualism a practical reality for all South African citizens. (2003:3)

This process has been devolved to the nine provinces in South Africa. It is expected that each province will have its own Provincial Language Committee (PLC) which will oversee language matters that affect specific provinces. They will advise on issues relating to language policy legislation, including the language policy, practices and legislation of the province and of the local authorities in that province. Furthermore, these Language Committees must oversee language in education, translation, interpreting, development, the promotion of the literature of the previously marginalized languages, language rights and mediation, lexicography and terminology development as well as coordinating and funding language research projects. (Implementation Plan, 2003:12-13). In my opinion, it is really at this level that changes can be made which will impact on the every-day lives of South Africans.

The national lexicography units will develop dictionaries in the official languages. In order to do so they will work with the National

Language Bodies. This relationship is not firmly established or defined as yet. These National Language Bodies are to consist of mother tongue speakers of the various languages and they are to advise panSALB on matters related to standardization, lexicography, terminology and literature.

The most exciting aspect of the implementation of language policy, both nationally, but more especially provincially, is that it will result in a substantial increase in the demand for language services, especially translation, editing and terminology development. Taking into account the rapidly declining enrolments in the indigenous language departments, this will also result in a dramatic increase in language students at tertiary level as language will become directly linked to jobs and the work-place. The National Bursary Scheme that has already been mentioned will serve a supportive role in this regard.

All national and provincial government departments will need to have properly staffed language units, overseen by the Language Committees. In my opinion, implementation will take place at the level of the language units. They will need to entrench the language policy in the department(s) and the province. They will need to raise awareness of the language policy, manage and facilitate translation and editing services, proof-read and edit documents in the official languages, facilitate the use of interpreting services, manage and facilitate training programs for new recruits in translation, editing and terminology development, as well as second language programs in the official languages of each province for the various employees. They will also need to develop terminology in collaboration with the DAC and the PLC's, act as intermediaries between the department/province and the DAC/panSALB.

All the language units required by the policy are to be established by the end of 2005. Each language unit will consist of competent staff either to translate or to out-source and check the quality of translation in the eleven official languages in national government departments, as well as the chosen official languages of the specific provinces. Outsourcing will be done via a tender process which will take place every two years.

Another feature of the implementation process is the establishment of a National Language Forum '... to monitor the implementation process, scrutinize and prioritize projects, and to drive advocacy campaigns'. (Implementation Plan, 2003:16). The Forum will also collaborate and

network when it comes to matters concerning the implementation of Language Policy. The main function of the Forum will be terminology development and language projects in order to prevent any duplication of efforts. In my opinion, this remains a major challenge for the present and outlined language structures. If not carefully monitored, the entire process could become bureaucratically bound, with one structure working against the other, rather than collaboratively. There will need to be mature and careful leadership, for example within the Forum and panSALB in order to ensure that efforts are not duplicated, but rather that they complement each other.

It is further proposed that a South African Language Practitioner's Council be established. This Council is to be made up of experts in translation, interpreting, lexicography, terminology, language editing and law. This will be a statutory body established through an Act of Parliament and members will hold office for a period of five years. This Council will

... manage the training, accreditation, and registration of language practitioners in an effort to raise the status of the language profession and the quality of language products by setting and maintaining standards (Implementation Plan, 2003:17).

This Council will further cooperate with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) training programs and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), both of which are already in existence, and which ensure that qualifications are uniform and are of an equal standard.

Mechanisms for Implementation

Mechanisms for implementation include the development of an on-line computerized National Termbank, which is already underway. This will again require the collaboration of all the structures mentioned above. The infrastructure surrounding interpreting, translation and editing skills will be developed in collaboration with the language units. Resources will need to be made available, e.g. simultaneous translation services, as well as training courses for translators, and a translation and editing policy will need to be put in place. Training programs will be developed by the DAC and the panSALB, in conjunction with accredited providers. Scholarships will be

offered to new recruits. Training programs will include short courses, in-service training and full-time training programs. The requirements of the NQF will be adhered to in developing training programs.

Public servants will also be required to develop proficiency in languages other than their mother tongue. Incentives will be developed by the DAC, in cooperation with panSALB, the Department of Education and the Department of Public Service and Administration, to encourage public servants to become multilingual by learning and maintaining additional languages. Accurate information must be provided to customers in the language they understand best and the customer should at no point be marginalised or disadvantaged through the use of languages. The Minister is to publish regulations regarding this code of conduct in the *Gazette* by the end of 2005.

Indigenous languages are also to be supported by new development strategies using new technologies. The DAC is committed to providing information technology infrastructure and building capacity. Computer software such as word processing programs, terminology management systems and translation software should be compatible to encourage the exchange of terminology and other information between all language units and collaborators such as the national Lexicography Units.

A directory of language services will also be created. It will contain the names of relevant agencies/companies/language units, translation, editing, and terminology services. Copies of this directory will be distributed to national and provincial government structures, and to language associations as well as universities. It will also be available on the DAC web-site and updated on a regular basis. There will also be a quarterly newsletter to promote the exchange of information. Language audits will also be conducted in collaboration with panSALB and research and development institutions in order to assist government to make informed decisions on Language Policy implementation. panSALB and the DAC will also run on-going language awareness campaigns to arouse public interest in language matters. This includes encouraging people to make use of their own languages, and to inform business and the private sector of the bottom-line benefits that can be derived from implementing multilingual policies. The first two years however, will focus on policy implementation in government departments and amongst public servants.

The DAC is also responsible for creating a telephone interpreting service. This is particularly suited to the complex multilingual environment in South Africa. It eliminates geographical distances and allows for access to an interpreter at short notice in emergency situations and at customer service points such as clinics and police stations. The service is already being tested at some seventy police stations and at local government level in some eleven clinics and eight customer service counters belonging to the Tshwane Metropolitan Council. (Implementation Plan, 2003:20).

Financial Implications of Policy Implementation

The costing exercise conducted by the National Treasury and presented to the Implementation Conference in 2003 demonstrated that the costs of implementing functional multilingualism are sustainable with minor adjustments to planned budgets. The use of six languages at national level, in line with the National Language Policy Framework, will not exceed an addition of 2% to planned budgets. Over a three year implementation period it is estimated that the total cost for all national government departments will amount to R 379 349 732. This amount includes setting up the infrastructure for a language unit in each department/province; recruiting and training, salaries and benefits of unit staff, work program of the unit to drive implementation, outsourcing translation services, publications for each department, as well as ongoing training of unit staff.

Whereas provinces and local governments will be led by their unique linguistic demographics, national government departments will have to make official documents available in Afrikaans, English, Xitsonga, Tshivenda, at least one of from the Nguni group (isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele or siSwati) and one from the Sotho group (Sesotho, Setswana or Sepedi). This implies a principle of rotation for the Nguni and the Sotho languages. This could become a contentious issue. In fact, it may amount to a stumbling block in the entire process of implementation at national level. Since 42% of the population speak Zulu and Xhosa as their mother tongue, the question then would be: why should they rotate with siSwati and isiNdebele, which is spoken by only 3% of the population collectively? In effect, linguistic nationalism may yet stand in the way of effective implementation of this policy.

Towards an Econo-language Plan

The language implementation plan appears elaborate and ambitious, if not somewhat clumsy. One may well ask: what is the benefit of this plan going to be in relation to the bigger picture, that is, the South African nation? It has become clear to me that national language policy needs to act in co-operation with the national vision of where we are going as a country in terms of the economy, education and so on. This has yet to be clearly articulated at national government level. One should not lose sight of the fact that economics takes place within a global society where languages such as English, French and Spanish take precedence. However, for many South Africans, this concept of globalization remains a myth. It is relegated to the world of Kentucky Fried Chicken and Coca-cola. It is a world in which many South Africans do not exist.

One cannot, however, doubt the importance of English at a macro-economic level in South Africa. Economists tend to agree that the macro-economic plan which government has put in place is a good one. However it has been at the expense of the micro-economy and job creation, thereby exacerbating what President Mbeki has referred to as 'the second economy' i.e. the 60% of our population who have been marginalized from the macro-economy primarily as a result of a lack of education and skills.

It is therefore at a micro-level of economics that the Language Implementation Plan could have real benefits, allowing South Africans to experience life through their mother tongues at all levels of society. Dare one assume that an emerging farmer could soon apply for a Land Bank loan, in order to purchase farm land, in the language of his or her choice, or should he be forced to apply in a language that he does not necessarily understand, thereby excluding himself from the main stream economy? What benefits could this new policy have in relation to the micro-economy? The answer to this question seems rather obvious. The social and economic costs of not implementing it would be far higher than the costs of implementation, in a society where English still remains a language spoken by the minority. A national sociolinguistic survey commissioned by panSALB in 2000 shows that more than 40% of the people in South Africa often do not understand what is being communicated in English. (Implementation Plan, 2003:9).

The trickle down effect of the National Language Policy is already been felt, for example, at tertiary institutions and within the media.

Universities are presently re-assessing their internal language policies. At the University of Cape Town, for example, a language Task Team (of which I was a member) has been established. The recommendation to Senate is that English be recognized as language of instruction. However, the creation of tri-lingual glossaries in isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans is being considered for key terms in various disciplines such as engineering law and commerce, and the intention is to develop multilingual awareness among the university community.

There are other positive developments which are taking place on the ground although these are not overtly stated in the policy document. The medical faculty has now also opted for a tri-lingual approach. All doctors must be proficient in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa in order to graduate. On site clinical examinations are conducted with patients in the language which the patient understands best. The students are then graded according to their ability to conduct a clinical examination as well as their language abilities. Language instruction takes place alongside clinical skills in an integrated approach and is taught from the second year onwards. This is a major shift in the education process, which directly impacts on the doctor's abilities in the outside world.

As far as the media is concerned, there are now programs on television which represent the eleven official languages. News bulletins are presented in all our languages, the most recent additions being Xitsonga and Tshivenda in 2003. E-tv, an independent and free channel, as well as SABC 3 offer a sign language interpreter in the corner of the screen, primarily during news bulletins. Radio remains an extremely important medium in South Africa and one can tune into stations in all eleven languages. Advertising, especially on radio, therefore takes place using all the official languages, directly fueling the economy and also showing that there is a need for such advertising.

These are tangible results which emanate from the present language policy. If we are to assume that government is now placing its political will behind the implementation of policy, then it is clear that there will be further trickle down effects which will impact the national economy. In this regard, Heugh (1999:79) states:

The private sector may independently discover that English is not

the only language of international trade, and that small to medium size exporters to neighbouring countries may discover the advantage of using the languages of target markets.

Naturally, this argument could also be applied within the country where target markets do not speak English.

Heugh (1995:23) also argues that South Africa needs to begin accommodating the economic reality of its trading partners, especially since these major trading partners are not English L1 nations. Such partners include Japan, Germany and China. Furthermore, she argues that South Africa needs to be looking toward the necessity of being able to trade in languages such as French, Swahili, Portuguese and Arabic. This is especially true if, in terms of NEPAD (New Partnership for African Development), South Africa is to become the engine of development in sub-Saharan Africa. There is a need for an on-going debate regarding the appropriateness of what I have termed 'econo-languages' for South Africa, and for Africa as a whole (cf. Kaschula, 1999:71)

The fact that English is largely seen as an alternative to Afrikaans in the South African context and that it has essentially only been pitted against Afrikaans in the past may ensure that English will fare well in the future in the corporate world, especially with the on-going emergence of an urban middle class drawn from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. This is increasingly becoming an English-speaking middle class that is linguistically homogenous. I would agree with Alexander (2002) that this is creating complicated divisions between those who are part of the economic mainstream and those who are not, creating divides which could become dangerous chasms in the long term, chasms which could fuel political manipulation and conflict.

Hartshorne (1995:317) argues that as far as English is concerned, '[i]t has to become an inclusive language, accessible to all, if it is not to continue as part of the 'screening out' process'. The point is, that ten years after independence, English has not become accessible to all. I would therefore disagree with Mike Nicol who argues, in his *Sunday Times* article (February 29, 2004) entitled 'Death of the mother tongue', that many young people are forsaking their mother tongue for English. He quotes a Xhosa student attending a previously model C school as saying that she doesn't want to learn her mother tongue (MT) as she only needs to learn English.

She is learning her language only because her mother is forcing her to go to the township for extra lessons.

While this may be true of a certain class of citizens, the reality is that the vast majority of South African children are not attending these elitist schools. They attend schools in the townships and rural areas where the emphasis is still on communication in the MT. Even English as a subject is often taught incorporating the MT in the medium of instruction. What Nicol is reflecting is the emerging division between that minority percentage of our population who have functional competence in English and the rest of the population who are dysfunctional in terms of English competence. The irony of this situation is that the very people that were excluded under colonialism and apartheid are again being excluded from the main-stream economy and society. Furthermore, we are relegating our country to a permanent state of mediocrity if people cannot be creative and spontaneous in their MT. This is so because a language policy and/or practice that perpetuates English hegemony does not allow for self-confidence to take route through the use of a first language. It is this very situation which the government's language implementation plan rightly wishes to address. It would seem that the virtues of multilingualism have now been recognized, ten years after democracy.

Conclusion

There appears to be a definite movement by government to implement South Africa's Language Policy now. However, it will take time before one can assess the effectiveness of this implementation. Furthermore, it will take time before the trickle-down effect of governmental implementation takes route firmly in the private sector. For this plan to succeed it is clear that there will need to be effective collaboration between the various role-players such as the DAC, panSALB as well as all the other structures which have been put in place. Most importantly, there has to be sufficient political will in order to drive the entire process. This still remains the real challenge of implementation. The role of government is to be the 'voice' of the people, a voice that the majority of the people can understand. This is true democracy at work.

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