

# Language, Freedom of Expression and Access to Information: Digging Deep into the 2013 John Dube Memorial Lecture

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## **Abstract**

The paper discusses freedom of expression and access to information, with special reference to the 2013 edition of the John Dube memorial lecture series at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The lecture was delivered by Velaphi Mkhize in isiZulu. Simultaneous interpretation into English and sign language was provided. This was a clear departure from previous lectures that used to be delivered solely through English. It is against this background that the paper critically explores what the language practices at the 2013 Dube memorial lecture mean or imply for freedom of expression and access to information.

**Keywords:** access to information, English, freedom of expression, isiZulu, language, sign language

**Gregory Kamwendo** *Ulimi Inkululeko Yokukhuluma kanye Nokufinyelela Olwazini: Kubukwa Ngeso Elibanzi Isifundo Sesikhumbuzo SikaJohn Dube Sonyaka Wezi-2013*

## **Isifingqo**

*Leli phepha lihlaziya imibono ephathelane nokukhuluma ngokukhululeka kanye nokuthola ulwazi kuqondiswe esifundweni sesikhumbuzo sika-John Dube sonyaka wezi-2013 esethulwa eNyuvesi YaKwaZulu-Natali eNingizimu Afrika. Isifundo sasethulwa uVelaphi Mkhize ngesiZulu. Ukutolika kusiwa olimini lwesiNgesi noLwezimpawu kwakunikezelwa. Lokhu kwenza umehluko*

*omkhulu kwezinye izifundo ezedlule ezabe zethulwa ngesiNgisi kuphela. Kusukela kulesi sendlalelo, iphepha lizohlaziya ngeso elihlodayo ukuthi kusho ukuthini lokhu kusetshenziswa kolimi okwenzeka esifundweni sikaDube sangonyaka wezi-2013 noma kukhombisani ekukhulumeni ngokukhululeka kanye nokuthola ulwazi.*

## **Introduction and Background**

For the first time in the history of the John Langalibalele Dube memorial lecture series at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the 2013 edition was delivered in isiZulu, an indigenous African language which also happens to be one of the eleven official languages of South Africa. Simultaneous interpretation into English and sign language was provided. The 2013 lecture opened a new chapter in the history of the lecture series given that the presenter, Velaphi Mkhize, had delivered his lecture in isiZulu. Traditionally, these lectures were delivered in English with no interpretation into other languages. It is also important to mention that UKZN is geographically located in a predominantly isiZulu-speaking province of KwaZulu-Natal. It is also a fact that isiZulu-speaking students constitute the majority of the student population. In addition, the UKZN language policy (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2006) and the Transformation Charter (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012) stipulate that isiZulu should be developed and promoted so that it can serve, in addition to English, as a language of scholarship. The UKZN language policy and its implementation plan provide for the use of English and isiZulu in public events such as public lectures and graduation ceremonies. Velaphi Mkhize's delivery of the 2013 John Dube lecture was, therefore, in conformity with the UKZN language policy and the institutional Transformation Charter.

The UKZN language policy has to be appreciated within the context of language policy at the national level. Following the dissolution of apartheid in South Africa, the new democratic dispensation adopted an inclusive language policy within which eleven (11) languages have been accorded official status. Nine (9) of these official languages happen to be African languages that were previously marginalized during the apartheid era. These languages are isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, SiSwati, Tshivenda, and isiNdebele. During the apartheid days, two

languages (English and Afrikaans) served as official languages. The new language policy aims at promoting national unity, entrenching democracy, promoting multilingualism, promoting tolerance towards linguistic diversity and supporting national development. According to the 2011 population census, isiZulu is the most widely spoken first language, followed by another African language, isiXhosa, and Afrikaans and English. The province of KwaZulu-Natal is the home of isiZulu, with 77.8 % of those claiming to be first language speakers living in the province (Statistics South Africa 2011).

This paper critically reflects on the 2013 John Dube lecture with the aid of two key concepts: freedom of expression and access to information. Specifically, the paper addresses the question: What do the language practices at the 2013 John Dube lecture mean or imply for freedom of expression and access to information? It is important to emphasize that my critical reflections are not focussed on the content of the 2013 Dube memorial lecture, but rather, I reflect on the language practices that were exhibited during the lecture. It should also be mentioned that the paper is product of a colloquium whose overall theme was African languages in the context of twenty years of South Africa's freedom and democracy. Among the sub-themes of the colloquium were *African languages and freedom of expression*; and *African languages and access to information*. The paper has brought together the two sub-themes. I have structured the paper as follows. In the following section, I introduce key concepts and theoretical framework for the paper. In the next section, I introduce John Dube and the Dube lecture series. I also provide a brief overview of the content of the 2013 lecture. This is followed by a section in which I discuss the use of interpretation into sign language and English. In the last section of the paper, I provide a summary and conclusion.

## **Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework**

This section comprises two parts. In the first part, I clarify the two key concepts that reside at the core of the paper. These concepts are freedom of expression and access to information. I start with the concept of freedom of expression, and trace it to the international level (United Nations level), national level (constitution of South Africa) and institutional level (UKZN). At the international level, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights guarantees freedom of expression (United Nations 1948). Freedom of expression is provided for in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as follows: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’ (United Nations 1948). With regard to South Africa, Chapter 2, Section 16 (1) and (2) of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression. At UKZN level, the Transformation Charter (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012) guarantees freedom of expression. Of course, freedom of expression is never absolute. Freedom of expression has to be exercised without limiting other people’s rights and freedoms. Some people do fail to recognize and appreciate the fact that freedom of expression comes with responsibilities. For the purposes of the current paper, I relate the language factor to freedom of expression (see also Green 1991; de Varennes 1994; Article 19, 1996). Freedom of expression is more than the freedom from being silenced. In other words, freedom of expression is more than being in a situation in which people are free to speak their minds without fear of being intimidated or persecuted. I extend the meaning of freedom of expression to include freedom to opt for one’s best linguistic medium of expression. Therefore, in this paper, the focus is on what I called linguistic freedom of expression.

I now come to the second key concept – access to information. Closely related to freedom of expression is the notion of access to information. The latter refers to the decoding or acquisition of information. One of the blockages to access to information is the language factor. For example, blockage to access to information occurs when information is packaged in a language that one does not understand. Sometimes access to information is created by illiteracy. Illiterate people are unable to access information from messages that are in written forms. Other people may not be able to access information simply because it is packed in some specialized or technical language. In some cases, some people, due to certain disabilities, may not be able to access information. It is against this background, therefore, that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2007), in Article 21, addresses issues related to access to information. One of the strategies for ensuring access to information is by ‘accepting and facilitating the use of sign language, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and other accessible means, modes and formats

of communication'. Article 9 of the same Convention puts emphasis on accessibility, and included here is access to information and communications, including information and communication technologies and systems. Language services such as translation and interpretation can assist with the improvement of access to information. In both translation and interpretation, information is conveyed from one language to another, thus making the information available to people who would otherwise not been able to access it if the language service had not been rendered. A democratic society should be an open society in which there are no unnecessary blockages to access to information. Access to information empowers people since knowledge (through information) is power. In the current paper, I am interested in the linguistically oriented access to information. In other words, I am interested in how knowledge of a language can or fails to facilitate access to information. Knowledge of a language can be said to be one of the keys for unlocking information that has been stored in that particular language.

It has been argued that language is a critical component of freedom of expression and access to information (Green 1991; de Varennes 1994; Article 19, 1996). Principle 9 of the Johannesburg principles on national security, freedom of expression and access to information provides that 'expression, whether written or oral, can never be prohibited on the ground that is in a particular language, especially the language of a national minority' (Article 19, 1996: 10). Freedom of expression (including freedom to use an appropriate linguistic medium of expression) and access to information (through an easily accessible linguistic medium) are some of the cornerstones of a democratic society. It has been argued that 'freedom of expression and freedom of information are vital to a democratic society and are essential for its progress and welfare and for the enjoyment of other human rights and fundamental freedoms' (Article 19, 1996: 6). It is also important to point out that freedom of expression and access to information lie within the human rights paradigm.

The theoretical framework for the paper is Cobarrubias' (1983) four language planning ideologies. Before I outline the language planning ideologies, it is important to define the concept of language planning. Crystal (1992: 220) defines language planning as 'a deliberate, systematic and theory based attempt to solve communication problems of a community by studying its various languages or dialects, and developing an official language policy concerning their selection and use'. At this stage, it is important to apply the

above definition to UKZN and the hosting of the 2013 John Dube memorial lecture. Language planning does not only apply to the national level but also applies to the institutional level, and it is in the context of the latter that I address language planning in this paper. In order to solve communication problems, UKZN has a bilingual (isiZulu and English) language policy. That is why it is worthwhile to determine the extent to which the bilingual language policy, as implemented during the 2013 John Dube memorial lecture, promoted or did not promote freedom of expression and access to information. Interpretation into English and sign language was also used during the lecture, thus making three languages (English, isiZulu and sign language) as media of the lecture. I also discuss how the use of these three languages in one memorial lecture fit into Cobarrubias' (1983) language planning ideologies of internationalization, linguistic pluralism, linguistic assimilation and vernacularization.

Internationalization refers to a situation when an international language is used as a lingua franca. The idea is that globally, people of different mother tongues are able to communicate with each other through a common language, and is in the case of the 2013 John Dube memorial lecture, that language was English. It also happens to be the language in which previous lectures had been exclusively delivered. The second language planning ideology, linguistic pluralism, refers to a situation under which two or more languages are accorded official status-like the post-apartheid era in South Africa. The third language planning ideology- linguistic assimilation-refers to a situation under which one dominant language is used in official domains without appreciating and recognizing that other languages also exist. Everyone, irrespective of their mother tongues, is forced by prevailing language policies and practices to use one language. Vernacularization, the fourth language planning ideology, refers to a situation where an indigenous language is developed and promoted to serve in official domains such as education, government, mass media, and others (Cobarrubias 1983).

### **John Dube and the John Dube Memorial Lecture Series**

John Dube is a well-placed figure in the political, ecclesiastical and literary history of South Africa. He was born on 11 February 1871 at Inanda in Natal, and died on 11 February 1946. In political circles, John Dube's name features

prominently in South Africa and beyond because he was the founding president of the South Africa Native National Congress (SANNC), an organization that was the forerunner to the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC, which is Africa's oldest liberation movement, has been the ruling party in South Africa since the installation of democratic and non-racist rule in 1994. To this end, one can justifiably describe John Dube as one of the pioneer African campaigners for freedom and democracy in South Africa. He can be described as one of the fathers of the struggle against apartheid and oppression (Marable 1974; Hughes 2001). However, it is important to appreciate that John Dube's role in politics does not always draw positive remarks. Whilst some people would regard John Dube to be a great hero of politics of African emancipation in South Africa, others take him to be a sell-out, a compromiser and a political accommodationist (Gasa 1999; Hughes 2012). Such divided opinion should be expected and appreciated. I will therefore not go into the debate given that it is not the primary aim of this paper, but it is helpful to acknowledge the divided opinion on John Dube's contributions to the political domain.

John Dube made history in the world of journalism by establishing the first African language (isiZulu) newspaper in South Africa, *Ilanga laseNatali* (Hughes 2001). Dube demonstrated the importance of freedom of expression and access to information when he established this newspaper. By making isiZulu one of the media of the newspaper, speakers of isiZulu had been given an opportunity to express their minds through a language they know best. John Dube's intention was that the newspaper should 'open the eyes of the people to their own best interests' (Hughes 2011 cited in Cabrita 2012: 437). The newspaper gave the oppressed and marginalized Africans a platform on which they could stand and voice their opposition to the unjust and undemocratic apartheid rule. What is even more significant is that Africans were able to celebrate their dignity and right to the mother tongue by writing in isiZulu, and also by reading newspaper articles that were in isiZulu. In addition, the newspaper also enabled Africans to directly send their messages of resentment against apartheid to the oppressor through English. As a result of the use of English, the voices of opposition could be accessed beyond the borders of South Africa. Actually, it is through English that the campaigners for freedom and democracy in South Africa were able to link up with the international community. It is in this regard that English could be regarded as the language of South Africa's liberation.

If one were to summarize the life of John Dube, one would be right to say that he was a preacher, politician, educator, writer and journalist. To this end, the University of KwaZulu-Natal found it worthwhile to honour and celebrate the life and achievements of John Dube. The University celebrates and honours John Dube in two ways: first, through the existence of the JL Dube Chair in Rural Education in the School of Education, and secondly, through the hosting of the annual John Dube memorial lecture series. The lecture series is jointly organized by the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics and the John Dube Chair in Rural Education in the School of Education in the College of Humanities at UKZN. The lecture series has been running since 2003.

The 2013 lecture, which is the subject of the current paper, was delivered by Velaphi Mkhize, under the title *'Isizulu language as an asset in the development of an African intellect in institutions of higher learning'*. Mkhize is the president and founder of the Umsamo Institute. He is a respected journalist, writer, and promoter of isiZulu and Zulu culture. In a nutshell, he is a language and culture champion. In his lecture, Mkhize stressed the importance of maintaining and protecting indigenous African languages such as isiZulu. He applauded the University of KwaZulu-Natal for being in the forefront in promoting and developing isiZulu. The content of the lecture echoed John Dube as he was a strong promoter of the use of isiZulu as exemplified by the books he had written in isiZulu. Dube also argued that some Africans used to be wrongly convicted in courts of law due to poor interpretation between English and isiZulu, and he proceeded to call for the hiring of educated Africans as court interpreters (Gasa 1999). John Dube was also the 'main adviser behind the Zulu society, whose goal was to take care of and preserve the heritage of our language' (Hughes 2011 cited in Cabrita 2012: 438). The content of the 2013 lecture, therefore, covered a subject that was very close to the heart of John Dube.

## **One Lecture, Three Languages**

As mentioned earlier, three languages were involved during the delivery of the 2013 Dube lecture, namely English, isiZulu and sign language. This language practice was employed in an attempt to improve access to information. The use of the three languages constitutes what Cobarrubias

(1983) calls linguistic pluralism. This example of linguistic pluralism could also be considered within the context of social justice and human rights. For example, the use of sign language meant that users of sign language were included, and afforded an opportunity to access to information. Sign language users are a linguistic minority who are sometimes ignored and denied various forms of rights, including the right to information.

English, as a bridging language, made the lecture content available to people of diverse mother tongue backgrounds. As such, this was a linguistically inclusive lecture (cf. Bamgbose 2002). If no interpretation had been offered during the lecture, it means only those competent in English would have been able to access the lecture. It is an inclusive approach meant to pass on the lecture content to as many people as possible. The linguistic pluralism approach exhibited at the 2013 Dube lecture reflects the linguistic pluralism that exists in South Africa. In fact, South Africa's eleven official languages also echo linguistic pluralism as a language planning ideology. As a higher education institution that is guided by a Transformation Charter (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2012), the use of three languages during the 2013 Dube memorial lecture was testimony of transformation in line with South Africa's post-apartheid culture of freedom and democracy. It is this dispensation, through the Constitution, that has provided a conducive environment in which the University of KwaZulu-Natal can employ language practices that recognize linguistic diversity.

However, despite the existence of South Africa's eleven official languages policy in which the vast majority are indigenous African languages, English still takes the centre stage whilst indigenous African languages remain on the margins of official domains of language use (Kamwendo 2006). The stigma that used to be attached to indigenous African languages during the Bantu education continues to haunt some South Africans. For example, whenever one calls for the use of an indigenous African language, one is quickly reminded that such languages have no place in the modern and globalized world. There is a tendency, therefore, to believe that African languages are meant for the rural areas and the lower levels of education, and not for the higher education domain. So when the 2013 John Dube lecture was delivered by Mkhize in isiZulu, it was a very bold move. It was a move that deflated the myth that indigenous African languages, if it all they do enter education, can only serve in the lower levels of education such as the primary school. South African universities, as the highest institutions

of teaching, learning and research, have the responsibility to cultivate pride and positive attitudes towards the previously marginalized and disadvantaged African languages of South Africa. The struggle to improve the visibility and value of African languages in education engages into a top gear when such languages enter into university lecture halls. The entry of isiZulu into the public lecture in 2013 symbolizes the challenging of the monopoly that Afrikaans and English used to enjoy in higher education institution during the days of apartheid.

With regard to freedom of expression, the use of isiZulu is a step in promoting it. Mkhize had the freedom to use English and he would have been perfectly in line with the institutional policy given that English is the main language of the UKZN. In addition, English is the principle language of scholarship worldwide. He, however, decide to option for isiZulu in order to express his thoughts on isiZulu in isiZulu. What Velaphi Mkhize did was to take advantage of the UKZN language policy which provides for a bilingual policy (English and isiZulu). Coming to access to information, it is important to mention that the delivery of the lecture in isiZulu enabled isiZulu speakers (who do not have competence in English or are partially competent in English) to access the lecture. The message of the lecture was the need to promote isiZulu, and it was important that isiZulu speakers got the message since often it is mother tongue speakers who display negative attitudes towards a language. The penetration of isiZulu into university teaching, learning, research and community engagement domains is a clear statement that in the post-apartheid South Africa, indigenous African languages are no longer good for nothing entities. The image of and attitudes towards indigenous African languages can only improve when people see such languages entering domains that were previously the monopoly of what are known as ex-colonizers' languages.

## **Sign Language Interpretation**

The use of sign language is cited in the South African Constitution. Actually Section 5 (a) (iii) calls for the development, usage and recognition of sign language as the first language of the deaf in South Africa. It is important to highlight that the presence of a sign language interpreter at the Dube lecture was in full recognition of the constitutional provision. The use of sign

language at the lecture was a mark of inclusion that is, ensuring that the deaf are not excluded from accessing information. It has also to be mentioned that South Africa is one of the countries that have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and within this Convention, the right to equal access to information is strongly emphasized. The Dube lecture is a public lecture and all persons are entitled to access the lecture. Of course we live in a world of reality, and it is practically impossible to attend to the linguistic dimensions of all people with disabilities given that there is diversity in disability (Batterbury 2012).

The provision of sign language interpretation at the Dube lecture was in line with the UKZN policy implementation plan that aims at improving access to information. It is important to stress here that sometimes there is a misguided view that sign language is not a language. By the same token, users of sign language are often ignored or even forgotten. It is as if such people do not exist in society. Though sign language is not one of the eleven official languages, and also not a language endorsed by the UKZN language policy, the organizers of the Dube lecture decided to provide sign language interpretation in order to ensure that sign language users have access to the lecture.

## **Interpretation into English**

English is the main language of scholarship and higher education in South Africa and globally. Whilst UKZN is officially bilingual (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2006), English is the predominant language of the institution. The same can be said about in English is South Africa since despite having the eleven official languages, English dominates in all official domains of use, making a mockery of the value and relevance of the other ten official languages (Kamwendo 2006). It is therefore easy to appreciate why previous Dube lectures were delivered through English. Previous instances whereby the Dube lecture was delivered solely in English conformed to what Cobarrubias (1983) calls linguistic internationalization. The danger with linguistic internationalization in South Africa is that the majority of the people do not have the competence to communicate through English (Kamwendo, 2006). The same observation has been made by Dijte (2008) when he notes that languages of former colonial powers, which now take

official status (e.g. English, French, Portuguese) have been learnt by the minority. Confining communication to such languages reduces access to information.

One of the UKZN strategic goals is the pursuit of African-led globalization. No university can ignore the force and/or power of globalization. In the globalized world, higher education institutions have to act carefully so that they can avoid being swept away by the forces of globalization, leading to a situation whereby we end up with universities that have no local relevance. Language is part of the internationalization process, and the critical place of the English language has to be acknowledged. There is no doubt that English is important in the global academic community, and it is against this that English is the main language of UKZN academic and non-academic undertakings. But it would make no sense for a university to invite the public to a public lecture, and at the same time, deny the same public the opportunity to speak the language it knows best. As a university that champions African scholarship and Africa-led globalization, UKZN sent the right message through the 2013 Dube memorial lecture. The message is that whilst English is a critical language in global engagements, it is important that if universities have to maintain local relevance, their use of local languages cannot be overemphasized. Public lectures offer any university an opportunity for the university community (staff and students) to engage with the general public, and public confidence in the university can be enhanced when some of the languages of the public are recognized and used by the university. This is particularly important when one realizes that in most African contexts, indigenous African languages do not enter the corridors of academia. Such languages are, unfortunately, degraded and considered to be not worthy of being used in academic discourses.

It is worth emphasizing that the provision of information to the public should be responsive and sensitive to practical realities such as: (a) the number of speakers of a language (b) levels of demand for the language (c) the territorial concentration of speakers of the language etc. It is important to acknowledge that South African higher education institutions practise what can be called a decentralized model of language planning. Under this model, each university has the autonomy to devise a language policy that best addresses its local sociolinguistic realities. These are the sociolinguistic realities of the province in which a university is situated. One should also acknowledge that provincial governments have the autonomy to formulate

their own language policies, taking due guidance from the Constitution. This model, known as the territoriality model, means that 'language rights vary from region to region according to local conditions' (Patten 2003: 297). Language rights that an individual can enjoy will therefore depend on the place one is physically located. Under the territoriality model, any language, by virtue of the numerical dominance of its speakers and being the language of wider communication in a particular area or region, would be accorded official status. The bilingual policy of UKZN was crafted in line with the territoriality model of language planning.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

I set out to make a critical reflection on the 2013 John Dube memorial lecture from the perspectives of freedom of expression and access to information. The paper has addressed the question: What do the language practices of the 2013 John Dube lecture mean or imply for freedom of expression and access to information? I have addressed what I call linguistic freedom of expression i.e. the freedom to use one's most preferred linguistic medium of expression. I have also addressed what I call linguistic freedom to access to information. The use of isiZulu, an indigenous language, as the medium of lecture delivery conforms to what Cobarrubias (1983) calls vernacularization. The use of isiZulu was an act of transformation in that a previously marginalized language had entered a domain that is normally monopolized by the English language. Through vernacularization as a language planning ideology, some isiZulu-speaking members of the public were able to make contributions through questions and remarks, something they could not have done had the lecture been delivered solely in English.

In the paper, I have also discussed the provision of simultaneous interpretation, and situated this language practice within the context of access to information. The interpretations into English and sign language widened access to information. The English interpretation is an example of a language planning ideology known as internationalization. Through English, people whose mother tongue may not be English are able to access information. Globally, the English language serves as a bridge connecting people of different linguistic origins. This is also happening in South Africa where English finds itself as a *lingua franca*. With regard to sign language

interpretation, it has been argued that it addressed the linguistic and social exclusion that sign language users face whenever no interpretation services are available. English and sign language interpretation, therefore, improved access to information.

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