

# **Editorial: African Languages in South Africa's Dispensation of Freedom and Democracy**

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The colonial period witnessed an unprecedented devaluation and marginalisation of African languages on the grounds that they were inferior to European languages, which were considered to be the vehicles by means of which civilisation and enlightenment could be attained (Wa Thiong'o 2004; 2005; Rwantabagu 2011; Zeleza 2002). Proponents of the use of European or foreign languages as mediums of education in Africa also justified this practice on the grounds that African indigenous languages are underdeveloped, meaning that they lack the vocabulary to carry the weight of complex phenomena in the sciences and other fields of scholarly endeavour (Chumbow 2005). Arguments of this nature have been shown to be part and parcel of the colonial mission, which saw Africa as an anti-thesis of Europe. Thus, if Europe and its languages is developed, Africa and hers' must be underdeveloped (Zeleza 2002; 2006). Several scholars have called for the decolonisation process to be extended to the mental realm and this incorporates the intellectualisation of African languages, amongst other possibilities (Alexander 1990; Dei 2012; Wane 2008). In this regard, Wa Thiong'o (1986: ii) wrote as follows:

... the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against [the] collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It

makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own.

The scenario mentioned by Wa Thiong'o in the citation above is well documented in Africa, where education continues to be delivered primarily through the medium of foreign languages well into the post-independence era (Kamwendo 2010; Zeleza 2006). This has contributed to the academic marginalisation of African learners as well as the African population that is not conversant in European languages. For example, statistics by the CHE (2010; 2013) have consistently shown that African learners have the highest dropout rate in higher education and are least likely to complete their studies in minimum time. This applies at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels (CHE 2010; 2013). Thus, while *formal access* (e.g. in terms of the statistics) to higher education has improved in South Africa since the dawn of the democratic era, *epistemological access*, incorporating but not limited to assumptions about the nature of reality, ways of knowing and thinking, and the relationship between the knower and that which is to be known (Watson-Gegeo 2004), remains a challenge (Boughey 2002). It has been argued that language is important as far as epistemological access is concerned; this incorporates the metaphorical use of language and its implication for teaching and learning (Boughey 2002; Watson-Gegeo 2004). Attention to epistemological access is critical if South Africa is to attain the democratic ideals enshrined in its noble constitution (Morrow 1993).

Marginalisation and exclusion extend to other domains of life as the African population is impeded from participating meaningfully in discourses concerning the state, the economy, and human rights, due to the over-reliance on European languages by African governments post-independence (Wolff 2010). It stands to reason, therefore, that without an effort to develop African languages for the purposes of education and wider communication, the hard earned democracy will remain a pipedream. It is also important on the other hand to situate language in culture, and this requires a critical examination of how language mirrors gender-based practices in society, these practices may be emancipatory or oppressive. At the same time, attention needs to be paid to the possibility of deploying African languages for the purposes of national development as well as regional integration. The importance of the two derives from the often cited argument that the wide use of African languages

will be detrimental to economic development. It has also been argued that the use of African languages in education and other public spheres risks exacerbating ethnic conflicts and disunity (cf. Chumbow 2005; Wa Thiong'o 2005). It is against the above-mentioned background that this special edition focusing on democracy and access to information, freedom of expression and gender equality, was conceived. Some of the papers are written in isiZulu; all the papers have an isiZulu abstract while some resort to the use of examples in isiZulu and isiXhosa, even though the paper is primarily in English. Through their practice, the contributors dispel the myth that African languages are best reserved for the home or private sphere, while European languages remain the primary mediums by means of which education and matters of the state are conducted.

The edition comprises 19 papers. Reference will be made to a few of these papers due to space constraints. The opening paper by Kaschula and Maseko is well positioned as it addresses the intellectualisation of African languages. The paper highlights the importance of language in concept formation; it discusses various legislative frameworks that have been put in place to enable the use of African languages for the purposes of education. The challenges as far as the implementation of these policies is concerned, as well as the possible solutions, are discussed. Ndimande-Hlongwa's paper, which is in isiZulu, echoes this theme. She highlights the challenges and opportunities for the development and use of African languages in various spheres. This is followed by a series of papers whose primary focus is the examination of the actual use of African languages in educational settings, be it at the basic or higher education level. The bulk of these papers focuses on vocabulary and terminology development. They provide ample evidence that African languages can be used for instructional purposes. For example, Mkhize *et al.* look at the development of vocabulary and bilingual instruction in the discipline of psychology; Mawonga *et al.* examine translation and terminology development, using the discipline of history as their point of departure; while Buthelezi *et al.* employ metaphor for the purposes of explaining the terminology used in media education at the postgraduate level. The reliance on metaphor is a creative solution to answer the criticism that there is inadequate vocabulary to express complex concepts in African languages. Watson-Gegeo (2004:333) has argued that:

not only is language metaphorical ...[but] thought itself is metaphori-

cal and made possible through categorization that is typically conceptualized as prototypes .... A great many categories and prototypes, however, in fact probably the majority, are socio-culturally constructed and therefore vary cross-culturally.

Buthelezi *et al.*'s paper demonstrates this quite well. The rest of the papers in this section examine academics and students' experiences of bilingual instruction.

Freedom of expression is another sub-theme of this special issue of *Alternation*. So, what is the relevance of this sub-theme in a special issue that focusses on the place of African languages in the 20 years of South Africa's democratic dispensation? Freedom of expression is one of the fruits of the post-apartheid era in South Africa. During the apartheid days, freedom of expression, especially among the non-whites, was severely muzzled. In the current issue of *Alternation*, freedom of expression is addressed in two ways: indirectly and directly. Indirectly, contributors to the special issue exercise freedom of expression through their choice of the language of publishing. Whilst English is the dominant language of scholarly publishing in South Africa and globally, some contributors like Ndimande-Hlongwa, Nkosi, Sibiyi and Gumbi, have written in isiZulu, an African language that happens to be one of South Africa's eleven official languages. The editors of the journal, by allowing authors, to use English and any other official language of South Africa, have created room within which authors could enjoy freedom of expression by choosing to write in their mother tongue. The direct expression of freedom of expression is evident in the paper by Kamwendo, which critically explores the notion of freedom of expression with reference to the 2013 Dube Memorial Lecture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The lecture was delivered in isiZulu by Velaphi (VVO) Mkhize, a mother tongue speaker of isiZulu. Simultaneous interpretation was provided through English and sign language. This was a clear departure from previous lectures which were delivered solely through English. Kamwendo critically debates what the language practices at the 2013 Dube lecture meant for freedom of expression.

In another paper on the same theme of freedom of expression, Nakanjani Sibiyi (*Inkululeko Yokukhuluma Kwabamaphephandaba: Ukuhlaziywa Kwezingosi Zomgosi Ephephandabeni 'Isolezwe LangeSonto' nasephephandabeni 'Ilanga LangeSonto'*) critically discusses the language

that columnists use in the two gossip columns in *Isolezwe LangeSonto* and *Ilanga LangeSonto* newspapers. The ethical implications thereof on freedom of expression, moral obligations and respect for inherent human dignity as enshrined in the constitution of our country, are problematized. Newspapers usually feature gossip columns in which columnists comment on latest tidbits about celebrities, politicians, ‘social butterflies’ and ordinary citizens. The columnists exercise their freedom of expression to write without shackles in newspapers. Sibiya argues that sometimes columnists tend to cross the line between exercising freedom of expression and making derogatory remarks about their subjects.

‘African languages, race and gender equality’ is one of the sub-themes of this special issue. This sub-theme is very critical since language was one of the tools that was used to reinforce apartheid in South Africa. With the demise of apartheid, there is a need to turn African languages into tools of political, social, and economic, transformation. At the same time, language is the key instrument by which gender ideologies are constructed, perpetrated and propagated. Rabe (2014:151) asserts that in South Africa gender intersects with race and class and is often prominent in shaping identities. A few papers focus on this theme. Ndimande-Hlongwa and Rushubirwa’s paper (*Gender Inequality and Language Reflections in the African Indigenous Languages: Comparative Cases from IsiZulu and KiSwahili*) adopted the documentary research method to discuss and reflect on gender inequality in IsiZulu and KiSwahili languages.

The above gives a gist of the contents of this special edition. What stands out about the edition, as mentioned above, is the use of an African language alongside English for the purposes of scholarly publishing. Many scholars shy away from the use of their languages for fear that their work will not have a wider readership and hence their citation index will not improve. The authors have indeed shown that the war to use African languages for academic and scholarly purposes is not meant for cowards (Zinhle Nkosi, this edition). It calls for commitment and sacrifice in order to build a foundation for the future. As the authors argue, democracy, access and success in South Africa and Africa in general will be strengthened by the use of African languages. Initiatives such as this one need strong support from academic institutions and government.

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