

# **‘Treading where angels fear most’: The South African Government’s New Language Policy for Higher Education and its Implications**

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## **Introduction**

Since the dismantling of apartheid, higher education in South Africa has undergone changes, including changes in language policy as proclaimed in Section 27 (2) of the Higher Education Act (1997). This act requires higher education to be in line with the national language policy and the multilingual reality of the country. The Language Policy for Higher Education was adopted in November 2002 to ensure that all official languages are equitably used and developed as academic/ scientific languages of higher education.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the Language Policy for Higher Education and its implications for the general restructuring of tertiary education. The paper begins with an overview of the national language policy as contained in the Constitution and then discusses the objectives and provisions of the Language Policy for Higher Education. The paper concludes with a discussion of prospects for the implementation of this policy. It is hoped that this article will shed light on the language planning challenges facing higher education in multilingual learning environments.

## **The National Language Policy on Higher Education**

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa recognises eleven official languages. Table 1 outlines the eleven languages as well as the number of L1 speakers for each.

Language	No. of Speakers	% of Speakers
IsiZulu	10.7m	23.8%
IsiXhosa	7.9m	17.9%
Afrikaans	6.0m	13.3%
Sepedi	4.2m	9.4%
English	3.7m	8.2%
Setswana	3.7m	8.2%
Sesotho	3.6m	7.9%
Xitsonga	2.0m	4.4%
SiSwati	1.1m	2.7%
Tshivenda	1.0m	2.3%
IsiNdebele	0.7m	1.6%

**Table 1: Eleven Major Languages of South Africa (2001 Census data)**

The Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) further provides for the use and development of the official languages, and in particular the African languages, as follows:

Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages (Section 6.2)

The national government and provincial government by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably (Section 6.4).

A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must:

- (a) promote and create conditions for the development and use of-

- (i) all official languages;
- (ii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
- (iii) Sign Language (Section 6.5).

Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable (Section 29.2).

Everyone has the right to use the language and participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights (Section 30).

Home Language	Universities	Technikons	Total	% of Total Enrolments
<b>Afrikaans</b>	71,979	27,363	99,342	16
<b>English</b>	136,957	55,509	192,466	32
<b>IsiNdebele</b>	2,641	637	3,278	1
<b>IsiXhosa</b>	38,247	28,396	66,643	11
<b>IsiZulu</b>	39,363	28,509	67,872	11
<b>Sesotho</b>	22,176	15,597	37,773	6
<b>Sepedi</b>	20,818	10,332	31,150	5
<b>Setswana</b>	19,661	15,542	35,203	6
<b>SiSwati</b>	4,236	2,242	6,478	1
<b>Tshivenda</b>	9,239	5,547	14,786	2
<b>Xitsonga</b>	9,239	5,547	14,786	2
<b>Other language</b>	21,319	4,070	25,389	4
<b>Language unknown</b>	6,294	4,805	11,099	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>402,129</b>	<b>203,366</b>	<b>605,495</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2: Home languages of students registered in public universities and technikons in 2000 (Higher Education Management Information Systems 2000)**

To ensure the practical implementation of this national language policy, Cabinet has approved the *South African Languages Bill* to be enacted soon. This Bill provides a more practical way of implementing the eleven official languages by providing a six language formula according to which each government departments should use at least six languages in written communication. These languages are English, Afrikaans, Tshivenda, Xitsonga one Nguni and one Sotho. The Nguni languages (SiSwati, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu) on the one hand, and Sotho languages (SeTswana, SeSotho, SePedi) on the other hand will be used on rotational basis.

The Language Policy for Higher Education should also be seen as an effort by government to recognise the multilingual reality of the country which is also reflected in higher education. The South African student population in higher education is linguistically diverse, and it is not uncommon to find a variety of home languages represented in the student body of a single institution. Table 2 above provides a breakdown of the home languages of students registered in public universities and technikons in 2000.

## **Objectives and Provisions of the National Language Policy for Higher Education**

The National Language Policy for Higher Education has the following goals.

### ***Nation building***

In its preamble, based on President Mbeki's speech (1999), the Language Policy emphasises the role of all South African languages to nation building:

the building blocks of (the) nation...unique idiomatic expressions that reveal the inner meanings of our experiences. ...the foundations on which our common dream of nationhood should be built.

According to Mbeki (1999 cited in the National Language Policy for Higher Education 2002:6) South Africans should learn each other's languages for the purpose of nation building. He has the following to say in this regard:

In sharing one's language with another, one does not lose possession of one's words, but agrees to share these words so as to enrich the lives of others. For it is when the borderline between one language and another is erased, when the social barriers between the speaker of one language and another are broken, that a bridge is built, connecting what were previously two separate sites into one big space for human interaction, and, out of this, a new world emerges and a new nation is born.

The multilingual approach to nation building is also supported by scholars such as Alexander (1995), Bamgbose (1991) and Webb (1996) and is contrary to the commonly accepted view which regards multilingualism as a barrier to nation building. In this latter view, a nation is said to be characterized with one national language, and its people should share a common history and territory. This approach to nation-building was predominant in the creation of nation-states in Europe during the early Modern period (Madiba 1999). But as several studies indicate, there seems to be a growing consensus, especially in developing countries of Africa, that multilingualism is a reality that cannot be wished away (Bokamba 1995; Bamgbose 1994, 1998). Some European scholars (e.g. Kelman 1971:34) argue that in a multilingual country, a common national language is not a necessary condition for national unity and that two or more languages can co-exist with minimal conflict between them.

In multilingual countries such as South Africa, universities are faced with the challenge of finding practical ways of using multilingualism to promote nation building.

### *Transformation*

Transformation must be the inevitable outcome of seeking to live out the values and shared aspirations of a democratic South Africa, as enshrined in the Constitution of 1996. An essential part of accomplishing the transformation envisaged in the Constitution is to rid of the legacy of apartheid and colonialism by urgently addressing the deep patterns of inequality that scar society. Some of these inequalities and injustices were perpetrated by virtue of language policy for higher education which was

used during apartheid era to prevent most black South Africans from gaining access to higher education as either students or workers (Dlamini 1996). A partial address of this situation was only achieved after the establishment of homeland universities, or of what are commonly known today as historically black universities. Unfortunately though, the policy of 'separate development' resulted in the privileging of English and Afrikaans as the official languages in higher education and, by the same token, in the marginalisation and underdevelopment of African languages. Thus the language policy was used as an instrument to control, oppress and exploit the majority of the people of South Africa (Hartshorne 1987; Marivate 1992; Reagan 1985, 1990).

Transformation in South Africa is therefore required in the sense that the legacy of apartheid as reflected in the under-development of the African languages must be eliminated. The new language policy and plan goes a long way towards achieving this objective. It seeks to redress the imbalances and injustices of the past, whilst mapping the way forward for the promotion and development of the indigenous languages. Whereas the apartheid language policies marginalised the use of indigenous languages in higher education, the new language policy on higher education seeks to promote their use as academic and scientific languages and media of institutional discourse.

### *Democratisation*

The promotion of multilingualism in higher education is also aimed at creating an environment in which all languages work together to promote the values of democracy and social justice enshrined in the Constitution. The centrality of language in the democratisation process, especially in plural societies such as South Africa, has been widely acknowledged in the language planning literature (Alexander 1995, Madiba 1999, Mazrui & Mazrui 1998, Webb 1995). Accordingly, multilingualism is regarded as a resource for democratisation since it enables easier entry into and thus participation in the national system for the masses. According to Kashoki (1993:150),

where multilingualism is consciously built into the country's language policy as the dominant principle, it has the likely

consequence of broadening opportunities for more citizens to participate in national affairs (cf. Madiba 1999).

The need for the democratisation of higher education in South Africa should be understood against the undemocratic language policies of the apartheid, which prevented the majority of the population from participating in higher education, especially at the so-called historically white universities (Dlamini 1996). Thus, democracy in higher education cannot be fully realised without the democratisation of language use with a view to concretizing and safeguarding values such as human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and basic freedoms entrenched in the Constitution (Madiba 1999).

### *Protection and Promotion of Linguistic Human Rights*

As indicated, the Constitution, guarantees linguistic human rights in education. According to the Bill of Rights:

Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights (Section 30 of the Constitution).

As indicated earlier, in education everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where the education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account:

- (a) equity;
- (b) practicability; and
- (c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices@ (Section 29 (2) of the Constitution).

The Language Policy for Higher Education is specifically aimed at protecting and promoting the rights as quoted above, but always with due

regard for considerations of equity and redress in the context of the values that underpin our shared aspirations as a nation.

### *Development of African Languages*

The Ministry agrees with the Council for Higher Education that consideration should be given to the development of South African languages other than Afrikaans and English for instruction purposes as part of a medium-to long-term strategy to promote multilingualism. In this regard, the Ministry will give urgent attention to the establishment of a task team to advise on the development of an appropriate implementation plan, including costing and time-frames. The specific recommendation of the Council for Higher Education with respect to the development of South African languages other than Afrikaans and English will be considered as part of this investigation.

### **Challenges and Recommendations**

The challenges facing the implementation of the National Language Policy for Higher Education in tertiary institutions may be viewed from two perspectives: the student's perspective and the institutional perspective. With respect to the student equity perspective, one challenging issue with regard to students in South Africa is that of selecting appropriate media. Debate around this issue has intensified in multilingual contexts. A recent UNESCO document (2003) also addressed this issue and ended with a recommendation that a multilingual approach to teaching and learning should be adopted in multilingual contexts. In most African countries colonial languages such as English, French and Portuguese are used as exclusive media of instruction in higher education (Heine 1992, Bokamba 1995). At present, not a single African language is used as a medium of instruction for disciplines other than African language departments in Africa. Afrikaans is the only language that has succeeded in becoming a medium of instruction in higher education. During the apartheid era, several universities used Afrikaans as the exclusive medium of instruction.

The main challenge facing South Africa and perhaps the rest of the continent is the introduction of indigenous languages as media of instruction. Although the use of the learner's first language is recommended by

international organisations like UNESCO, in South Africa the use of such languages is rejected for politico-historical reasons. The use of African languages is seen to promote and entrench apartheid policies of 'divide' and 'rule' (Reagan 1985, 1990). Paradoxically, research has shown that most of the students admitted to South African universities have low proficiency in English although it is used as the exclusive medium of instruction at most institutions of learning. The result is high drop-out and failure rates at such institutions.

In Section 15(1) of the Language Policy for Higher Education, the Ministry acknowledges the current position of English and Afrikaans as the dominant languages of instruction in higher education and concludes that in the light of practical and other considerations it will be necessary to work within the confines of the status quo. The Policy, however, requires that consideration be given to the development of other South African languages for use in instruction as part of a medium to long-term strategy to promote multilingualism.

In this regard, the Ministry gives urgent attention to the establishment of a Task Team to advise on the development of an appropriate framework and implementation plan, including costing and time-frames. The specific recommendation of the Higher Education Council with respect to the development of other South African languages will be considered a part of this investigation (Section 15.2). Accordingly, in 2002 the then National Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, appointed a Task Team to advise him on the intellectualisation and use of the indigenous African languages as media of instruction in higher education. The Ministry of Education has further committed itself to making resources available for the intellectualisation of these languages.

Universities, as centres of learning and research, should establish creative ways of enhancing multilingualism in their programmes. A more balanced approach is needed to use both English and African languages as media of instruction. One approach that has been recommended by several scholars (cf. Bamgbose 2000b, Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986) is the 'Complementary Language Use Approach' which proceeds from the premise of using the African languages as auxiliary media of instruction in the non-language disciplines with the long-term goal to use them as primary if not exclusive media of instruction in certain disciplines according to the realities

of the society concerned (Bokamba and Tlou 1980:54). According to Dua (1994:132),

the development of the balanced complementarity of English with the indigenous languages in all the Third World countries is necessary for viable language education, growth of multilingualism and development of indigenous languages.

As Bamgbose (2000b:207) further indicates, in multilingual and multicultural context, there is need to go beyond 'linguistic imperialism, linguicism and language rights to stress the interdependent relationship between English and the indigenous languages'. Thus there should be no conflict between the promotion of English and the recognition of its interdependence with other languages. In this regard, South Africa faces several problems. The first problem is the selection from the nine indigenous languages since the cost of using all of them would be prohibitive. A practicable option would be to select first a few languages in a particular area according to what is spoken in that area. For example, the University of the Witwatersrand, among others has indicated that it will adopt seSotho to be a recommended medium of instruction upon development. Universities in other provinces can also adopt the main African languages of the provinces and develop them as media of instruction.

The second difficulty is that African languages have not been developed to a level where they can be used to teach disciplines such as science and technology at tertiary level. This problem is being addressed through several initiatives, including a Task Team appointed by the Ministry of Education to develop strategies to promote the intellectualisation of African languages. The pan South African Language Board (panSALB) also has several bodies, such as the National Lexicography Units and the National Language Bodies, that are involved with the development of African languages. Institutions of higher learning are also involved in many ways in creating language resources such as corpora, and in researching useful language development strategies (Madiba 2000).

With respect to an institutional discourse perspective, language management in multilingual institutions of higher education also poses a serious challenge (cf. Kaplan and Baldauf 1997). According to Jernudd

(2002:299) although there is a huge international literature that deals with the postcolonial development of language policies of newly independent states, there are very few publications that deal specifically with the universities' postcolonial transition. Thus, the first challenge facing universities in South Africa is the formulation of language policies that entrenches multilingualism in institutional discourse.

All institutions of higher education are encouraged to promote multilingualism for social, cultural, intellectual and economic development. These policies could include changes to events such as graduation ceremonies to acknowledge and accommodate diversity in the constituency body, requiring proficiency in an African language as a requisite for a range of academic fields of study and offering short courses in African languages as part of staff development strategies. In addition, institutions could consider the allocation of preferential weighting to accommodate applicants who have matriculation passes in indigenous languages. Clearly, change in the diversity of student and staff profiles, initiatives such as student support, mentorship and counseling, and the creation of a receptive institutional culture which embraces linguistic diversity are other crucial ways of promoting a climate where all people feel affirmed and empowered to realise their full potential. Finally, the policies should be responsive to the needs of the disabled, for example, the need to develop competencies and capacity in Sign Language.

### **Guidelines for Drawing-up a University Language Policy**

The challenges discussed above require a policy solution. As already indicated, each university was required by the Language Policy on Higher Education to develop its own language policy and submit it to the Ministry by 31 March 2003. The Ministry of Education has thus requested panSALB to work out guidelines to help tertiary institutions to develop language policies. In its document entitled *Guidelines on the layout of a language policy document for institutions of higher education* (February 2003), panSALB provides the following guidelines:

#### *Preamble*

Each policy should have a preamble that indicates the institution's constitutional obligations with respect to language and its

commitment to recognising and accepting diversity, and to the promotion of equal language rights. It should also state the aims and objectives of the language policy.

### *Contextualisation*

The policy should also give the contextual information regarding the institution's current language practice, the need for change, benefits of promoting multilingualism, language preferences of staff and students, and plans for making optimal use of the linguistic resources available within the institution.

### *Aspects of the Language Policy*

The policy should specify the following:

#### *Language(s) of Instruction and Research*

Whereas Section 15 of the Language Policy for Higher Education allows the use of English and Afrikaans as the media of instruction, at least one official African language of the province concerned should also be introduced as a language of instruction, if only as the culmination of a long-term strategy. The institution should indicate how introduction of such a language will be supported by terminology development, translation and development of study materials used in examinations, theses and assignments.

#### *Language of Administration*

The policy should indicate which language(s) will be used for internal communication (oral and written) and external communication (oral and written). Internal spoken communication includes Council and Senate meetings, departmental meetings, faculty meetings, enquiries and requests made by students. With regard to external spoken communication, the policy should address the language to be used for communication emanating from the institution, including the dissemination of information to the public.

#### *Labour Relations*

The policy should indicate which language(s) will be used in communicating conditions of service, in conducting job interviews

and disciplinary hearings, and in formulating performance agreements and health and safety requirements.

#### *Social Events*

Institutions of higher education should also indicate in their language policy which language(s) will be used in social events such as graduation ceremonies, rag and sport events.

#### *Workplace Training and Capacity Development*

Institutions should also indicate what language acquisition programmes will be put in place for all employees to increase basic competencies in dealing with African language(s) as media of instruction and administration.

#### *Translation and Interpreting Services*

The policy should also indicate what translation and interpreting services and training will be put in place to support both internal and external communication.

#### *Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms*

The policy should make provision for the establishment of a language committee to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the language policy.

#### *Cost-benefit Analysis*

The institution should provide a clear annual budget for the implementation of the language policy.

These guidelines compare well with the categories given by Jernudd (2002:299) for designing a language policy for a bilingual university. These categories include

teaching acts between students and teachers, study acts by students, administrative acts between students, members of faculties and administrator representatives of university departments and administrative offices, research acts, writing and other presentation

acts, service acts by members of faculties in communication with many audiences, governance acts between representatives of the university and representatives of government offices and the public.

### **To Comply or not to Comply?**

The crucial challenge facing the Language Policy for Higher Education is whether institutions of higher education will comply with the requirements and the guidelines set out by panSALB. Already several universities have started to express fear and concern about government interference with the autonomy of their institutions. In fact, the Higher Education Act has been criticised for delegating excessive powers that could be misused to achieve political goals.

However, several universities have already responded by drafting language policies that have been submitted to the Ministry of Education, who in turn, has asked panSALB to evaluate the policies. Clearly, most universities prefer monolingual policy with either English as the dominant language, or Afrikaans, as is the case of traditional Afrikaans universities. Accordingly, panSALB has referred such policies back to their institutions for revision so as to render them compliant with the policy guidelines and the requirements of the National Language Policy for Higher Education.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that the context in which South African universities have operated during the past one hundred and thirty years has completely changed. The democratic elections of 1994 ushered in a dispensation based on the recognition of language and cultural diversity whereby all universities were required in terms of the National Language Policy on Higher Education to formulate language policies that foster multilingualism and ensure simultaneous development of all the official languages as academic/scientific languages. However, the Ministry acknowledges the current position of English and Afrikaans as the dominant languages of instruction in higher education and believes that in the light of practical and other considerations it will be necessary to work within the confines of the status quo until such time as other South African languages have been

developed to a level where they may be used in all higher education functions. The use of these languages should not serve as a barrier to access and success. The policy further requires that consideration be given to the development of other South African languages for use in instruction, as part of a medium to long term strategy to promote multilingualism.

The National Language Policy on Higher Education should be viewed as an opportunity to create new institutional identities, cultures and missions by embracing and accommodating the rich diversity of cultures and languages in South Africa (cf. Asmal 2003:4). A multilingual approach to learning and teaching in South African universities will furthermore create an environment that promotes freedom of thought and speech to produce cadres who are self-motivated and responsible thinkers. The 'complementarity' approach proposed in this paper will enable students to use local languages to participate meaningfully in the creation, dissemination and application of knowledge. Such knowledge can then be globalised through the use of languages of wider communication, such as English. And again the local languages may be used to customise the global knowledge for use by the general public as is the case in countries such as Japan.

Furthermore, the use of indigenous languages, either as auxiliary or primary media of instruction and learning, has the potential to increase performance rates in general. As the Language Policy on Higher Education indicates, the language-medium factor cannot be isolated as the only factor contributing to poor academic performance at most institutions. While the problem is multifarious, there is little doubt that language is a critical factor.

Although the implementation of this Policy is in its infancy, it provides some insight into and sheds light on language problems facing higher education in multilingual contexts and how such problems can be addressed by means of a clear language policy and implementation plan. The guidelines provided for drawing up language policies for tertiary institutions are significant since there is still a dearth of literature that deals with this subject.

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