

‘My vuvuzela shall not be silenced’: Towards Linguistic Equity in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the linguistic landscape of South Africa by surveying the effects and opportunities that globalization, glocalization and emerging technologies present for the cultivation of our language ecology. It argues for the revitalization of our indigenous languages by positing an integrated pluralistic vision invested in strategies for managing the linguistic socialization of our students. Addressing the multilingual realities of our student population means activating a classroom domain of inclusion instead of exclusion and is a norm of best practice intimately aligned with our cherished values of equity and access.

Keywords: Multilingualism, South Africa, indigenous languages, linguistic ecology

The strengths of multilingualism¹, previously invisible, need to gain higher visibility. This paper calls for a change in the linguistic landscape of South African universities by advocating the development of dynamic linguistic contact zones which denaturalize English and give voice and agency to the diverse linguistic resources students bring to their learning domains. It argues that the languages that have been absent from our educational institutions,

¹ For this analysis I use the term multilingualism in an inclusive way, i.e. as the acquisition and use of two or more languages, so bilingualism is treated here as a particular instance of multilingualism.

and confined to the home and community, must now become visible and audible in our schools and universities as a politics of practice.

An examination of South African newspaper headlines suggests that there are persistent fears about the status of indigenous languages in South Africa:

- ‘Prominence of English Kills African Languages’ (*Daily News* December 24, 1999).
- ‘Language Barrier: South Africa has Eleven Official Languages, but Many could Soon Face Extinction’ (*Sowetan Sunday World* August 5, 2001).
- ‘African Languages “Under Threat”’ (*Mail & Guardian* February 1, 2007).
- ‘School Kids Reject African Languages’ (*Sunday Times* November 8, 2008).

These headlines chronicle the anxiety and threat faced by our indigenous languages under the onslaught of English. It is also a subliminal plea for the rehabilitation and restoration of our indigenous languages and advocacy for a more just and egalitarian society. This is especially pertinent in the light of evidence culled from a number of international surveys in 2005 that point out that seventy five percent of the world’s population do not speak any English, and ninety four percent do not speak it as their mother tongue (Makoni & Pennycook 2006:99).

If indeed discrete groups are to promote peace, mutual understanding, development and social stability, they require enhanced communication. Multilingualism affords us the opportunity to create communicative contexts that would empower people to improve their social welfare and civic life. And yet, an irony in the history of Africa is that many nations are reluctant to implement language policies that promote indigenous languages. By adopting a former colonial language as their dominant lingua franca, they are inadvertently courting the death of African indigenous languages, since the dominant languages cannibalize them. The South African constitution has enshrined legal and moral obligations to liberty, equity and dignity in its recognition of eleven official languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, English, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, siSwati,

Tshivenda, and isiNdebele) in the Bill of Rights. In some quarters, however, this has been criticized as utopian nonsense and political grandstanding. If indeed South Africa moves to develop a credible language policy, the State needs to conceive and execute a coherent strategy for language maintenance and multilingualism, which goes beyond rhetoric and constitutional fanfare.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 1951) report on languages in education still has currency today. The recommendations acknowledge that the mother tongue is a person's natural means of self expression and one of the first needs is to develop the power of expression to the full. The report also points out that there is nothing in the structure of any language which precludes it from becoming a vehicle of modern civilization. Of particular interest to South Africa is Article 6, which states if the mother tongue is adequate in all respects, and could serve as a vehicle of university and higher education (Mesthrie, Swan, Deumert & Leap 2000:169). These make a strong case for indigenous language revitalization in South Africa, making it incumbent on the State to allocate resources and expertise for the development and growth of all official languages.

In an interdependent and technologically enriched world the opportunities for the growth and maintenance of indigenous languages are unprecedented. It is these possibilities that need to find expression in the linguistic ecology of South African universities. Efforts to transform the virtual linguistic landscape of cyberspace to include indigenous knowledge systems as equal and valued options is a strategic innovation from monolingual imperialism. This is possible because new communication technology and globalization have significantly impacted on language practices in the twenty first century. National economies have become indelibly integrated in the global economy, with money and workers becoming much more mobile. In addition, communication and information networks have grown enormously. In a virtual linguistic space awash with possibilities, our indigenous languages must be understood as part of a dynamic system of world languages.

Approximately fifty percent of Google users worldwide choose a language other than English to access the web-search utility (Garcia 2009:182). New software has increased the potential number of different scripts available to users. Moreover, an increasing number of websites are

resorting to multilingual strategies, allowing users to access the internet in a language of choice. Translation is also readily available and serves as a significant resource for the development of metalingual competence. Voice-over internet protocol, available to consumers at little or no costs, coupled with short text messaging (SMS), enable many more people to communicate across national borders. They are able to do so not only in different languages, but also by using different modalities, where language is bound up with visual, audio and spatial semiotic systems. The ability to download media files through podcasting enables many users to share their own languages across time and space in unprecedented, evolving and ever expanding ways. The internet is becoming increasingly multilingual mainly because the agents of economic globalization have realized that adapting to local cultures and linguistic preferences is an essential aspect of remaining competitive, and because the commodification of language-related goods constitutes an enormous and growing global market. These developments have made it possible to hold on to multiple languages and to engage in multiple communicative and literacy practices.

The twenty first century, characterized by economic and environmental migrations, displacements from conflicts and political unrest, international trade, tourism and technological advances in communication, renders multilingualism a necessity. This form of multilingualism is crucial if transformation is to occur in the lives of millions of children and adults globally. In many places in the world entire communities are marginalized because of their native, localized languages, and individuals are consequently condemned to unemployment, menial labour and vituperative forms of social and political exclusion. In Southern Africa, research by Bamgbose (2000), Mazrui (2004), Vavrus (2002) and Mgwashu (2007), among others, has extensively documented the abandonment and decline of native voices in preference for English. English is widely perceived as a language of status, signifying educational and economic empowerment.

Understandably, these choices of a perceived prestige language such as English are made in many instances in the quest for economic security, reinforced by an apartheid legacy in which Bantu languages were used to separate, discriminate and disempower. It is at this ideological nexus that the state is required to urgently intervene by marshalling its considerable resources and affording space and recognition to indigenous languages in

both basic and tertiary education, as well as in its employment and management practices. The agenda is certainly not to dictate language choices or to politicize or romanticize language preferences but to avail to ordinary South Africans of the possibility of students being educated in the linguistic resources they bring to classrooms and universities. Other advantages are options to undertake work, transact business and seek legal services in a language of choice. An additional option is the confidence an individual gains, assured that his or her interests would not be prejudiced by using an indigenous language.

The evolution of a language in the classroom requires a shift from teaching different languages as subjects towards using a mix of languages to teach subjects. Using a language as a medium of instruction provides more exposure to the language and an opportunity to integrate content and language. This value laden enterprise would see the languages of the public domain in South Africa given conscious recognition in the learning domain. The development of such metalingual awareness would undoubtedly deepen our democracy and enhance the quality of our intercultural communication and contact.

Developing and implementing a bilingual curriculum, however, is only half the battle. Our practices must be informed by an astute strategy. Are our objectives language shift or language maintenance? That is, is South Africa's Education Department encouraging students to shift seamlessly and rapidly into mainstream academic English, or do we have the maintenance of the home language as a goal at the same time as developing competence in academic English? If the department is to succeed in multilingual language planning, all curricula must articulate a well defined sequence of continuity and progression.

Further the concept of the 'mother tongue' cannot be simply glossed over. Skutnabb-Kangas (1981: 18) has problematized the notion of the mother tongue quite astutely. The mother tongue may be referenced in the following terms:

- origin: the language one learns first;
- competence: the language one knows best;
- function: the language one uses most; and

- identification:
 - internal: the language one identifies with; and
 - external: the language others identify one with.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that language is not a static phenomenon but something which is dynamic, continually evolving against the backdrop of variables which themselves are continually changing. This understanding must also inform our use of the term, which underlies the complexity that language poses.

Therefore, some critical questions that tertiary institutions in South Africa need to ask of themselves are as follows:

- How could the pace of change accelerate so that universities become multilingual in practice as well as in population?
- Within the multilingual context, how will curricula reflect an intercultural understanding across different lived experiences and world views?
- What steps do we take to restore and empower those who have been historically oppressed, with the resulting decline or loss of indigenous languages?

To initiate the change process, initially universities would be required to create the ideological spaces for multilingual education while expanding the linguistic capital of faculty and staff. Taking South Africa's politically burdened context into consideration would expose several variables that could negatively impact language status. Such variables give insight into the existing linguistic challenges currently besetting multilingualism in tertiary institutions. Historically, both colonialism and apartheid have impacted on our linguistic landscape by relegating the majority of mother tongue languages of African indigenous origin while simultaneously privileging English and Afrikaans. A similar pattern is evident in Africa and the rest of the colonized world.

In the light of this phenomenon, it is inevitable that the processes of decolonization are necessary precursors to linguistic equity. The perceptions of indigenous languages as inferior and ancillary are for the most part genealogical. Naming, cataloguing and classifying indigenous languages

were part of the colonial inventories of control, a trend that was and remains reductive and pejorative. For example Springer, writing in 1909 about *ChiShona* in Southern Africa comments, ‘various terms have been invented by the white man, the most common being *Chiwina*, meaning, *the language of the filthy people*’ (Makoni & Pennycook 2006:67). As it stands, indigenous languages worldwide have been treated as the disease of the poor. There is need, therefore, to deconstruct myths about language value, status and function, engendered by colonialism, consumer culture and failed state policies on language development and maintenance.

As language users, we have to deconstruct our speech repertoires and critically gaze at what we take as natural and for granted. This recognises that languages have never been assigned separate functions or territories or status, except where ideological graft is principal. This understanding is critical to explaining why English has acquired the status of a ‘killer language’. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986:16) puts it succinctly:

the language of an African child’s formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. Thought in him took the visible form of a foreign language.

If we are to foster a plurilingual repertoire in the learning domain then we have to summon the temerity to review our language practices accordingly. This is precisely because our students come from a variety of linguistic, cultural and social contexts, which largely go unrecognized in curriculum planning and instruction. Prioritizing students’ own language experiences is motivating and empowering, and is interpreted as an invitation to learn.

I am of the conviction that the seven principles offered below could significantly enhance our plurilingual status and broaden the appreciation of our South African diversity. Most importantly, implementation of multilingualism could create a discursive space in which students from diverse backgrounds can negotiate their linguistic identities within a pedagogic framework which recognizes their linguistic histories and cultural contexts as valuable resources and platforms for learning.

Firstly, indigenous languages should be interdependent with and not dependant on English. Our pedagogic practice must consider the development of indigenous languages in tandem with the development of the

languages of instruction. This idea is supported by Cummins in what he calls the ‘interdependence hypothesis’, in which skills in both languages are mutually complementary and both first and second language development are closely tied together (Mesthrie, Swan, Deumert & Leap 2000:373). It is also now widely accepted that strong academic and conceptual skills in the mother tongue are crucial for achieving those in an additional language. Shattering the colonial hierarchy of superior and inferior languages and creating spaces for languages to coexist and complement each other is critical to this realization. Multiple languages must be seen as cultural and economic resources instead of being viewed as a problem. This change in the public mindset is crucial to the development of a culturally rich, linguistically diverse and democratic society. Because the vitality of a language can only be determined by its use, everyday usage in the learning domain is necessary if we are to realize this goal. I acknowledge, nonetheless, that the type of languaging selected for teaching will depend on particular instructional circumstances. Importantly, we have to ensure that languages do not exist in competition on our campuses but in a functional interrelationship. Our goal is not to replace a dominant lingua franca with another but to be sensitive and culturally in tune with the vibrant multilingualism that obtains across our geopolitical spaces.

The *second* principle I advocate is code switching. Quality code switching, is used not only to call attention, discipline and issue instructions, but to provide meaningful pedagogic support. The pedagogic advantage to be gained from code switching is that it enables learners to explore ideas and concepts in a familiar environment and is a useful resource for mitigating the difficulties of learning through another language. Code switching also assists in maintaining the focus of students by regaining their attention and can help clarify and reinforce learning. Code switching may also be interpreted as an enabling, scaffolding technique that assists students in understanding learning content in an additional language. According to Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez and Alvarez (2001:128) code switching is a systematic, strategic, affiliative and sense-making process. Consequently, universities with a multilingual agenda should be domains where code switching should be the expectation rather than the exception (Makoni & Pennycook 2006:237). As it stands, teaching and learning at universities are discrete monolingual events. Teachers should be expected to now learn to

communicate a plurilingual discourse in the classroom as students come to appreciate each another's languages and cultures.

Co-langaging is a *third* important factor for multilingual success in the learning domain. Co-langaging is when the content of a lesson is delivered to different language groups simultaneously. PowerPoint enables co-langaging. In co-langaging the content can be shown, for example, in both isiZulu and English for instance. The use of this teaching technology also makes it possible for deaf students to be accommodated, and helps to integrate students from diverse linguistic groups. Co-langaging also occurs when subtitles accompany a film. This process develops cross linguistic awareness both consciously and unconsciously and is useful in developing the multilingual repertoire of students.

The *fourth* principle is either previewing or reviewing (or both) a lesson in the majority mother tongue if the language of instruction is not that language. This is a useful strategy which encourages and supports students by using their home languages as a supporting tool to clarify ideas and concepts. The instructor gives the gist of the lesson, (the preview), most often in the home language of the students, then teaches the lesson in English, then once again reviews the lesson in the majority home language. If the instructor is not conversant with the mother tongue language, suitably trained tutors may be employed in a team teaching approach.

To develop the capacity for dual language instruction we require both pre-service and in-service training for instructors as well. At present, the University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal's lecturing staff are trained to communicate a monolingual experience at university. The success of the multilingual enterprise depends on building capacity in dual medium instruction.

In addition, the signage, notices and communication from the university must reflect a dynamic multilingual domain. The value of our indigenous languages must not only be talked and theorized about it must have practical, everyday application. Multilingual signage has an important role in defining the socio-political and sociolinguistic character of a university. Consequently, it must become the norm and an integral part of university culture, linguistic policy and identity.

The *final* principle is that of translanguaging. According to Baker (2001), translanguaging involves the hearing, signing, or reading of lessons in one language, and the development of the work (the oral discussion, the

writing of passages, the projects and experiments) in another language. Translanguaging helps students develop by reinforcing both their first and second languages. In some courses, certain parts of the syllabi can be taught in the majority mother tongue, whilst the rest of the module may be taught in English. I taught an undergraduate course in Communication at Dubai University in which I taught the English content in rotation with Arabic. The content was not repeated in either language and students were assessed in both languages. The final mark consisted of an average of assessment tasks in both Arabic and English. Of note, was the enormous popularity the course enjoyed amongst Arabic students who relished the opportunity to translanguage in English and Arabic. The benefit of translanguaging was that students acquired a deeper understanding of the subject matter while simultaneously developing their competence in the weaker language. In addition, students with different levels of linguistic competencies were able to collaborate with one another to realize the learning goals of a particular lesson or assignment.

If we are sincere about multilingualism, then we have to replicate the bilingual experience of learning and teaching in our universities. Multilingualism revolves around the issue of equity, equity for the students, their languages, and their cultures and communities (Garcia 2009:319). Multilingualism also creates a non-threatening learning context and builds linguistic identities. Naturally, using two or more languages in a classroom is not without its challenges, particularly when questions of academic rigour and the maintenance of high expectations come into question. One needs to take into account both the situational and operational factors that would make multilingual learning and teaching feasible. Situational factors such as the social and linguistic background of target students, population diversity and literacy levels in languages need to align convincingly with curriculum objectives and assessment instruments. In its infancy, it would be prudent to introduce bilingual programmes at university by what Ofelia Garcia terms a *sliding bilingual allocation*. What is meant by this is that as bilingualism develops the allocation of time to different languages changes (2009: 209). For example, we may introduce isiZulu in a mainstream English medium class in history in a 90:10 allocation program. As students become more proficient within constructivist pedagogy, the instructional time in isiZulu can increase gradually, while that of English can decrease correspondingly.

Learning experiences that are technologically enriched, drawing from films, tapes, videos and photographs from cellular phones which are easily transferable with Bluetooth technology, the Internet and other multimedia platforms are a significant boon to multilingual education. Likewise, the use of language that is tautological, that is, saying the same thing twice in different ways to enhance understanding, will also greatly facilitate multilingual learning. In addition, all disciplines have different linguistic registers and students should be made aware of such differences. Vocabulary will feature high on the list of challenges in a multilingual domain. Vocabulary must be taught directly and systematically, focusing on both meaning and form. The focus should be on both technical words and high frequency words and ideally included in a 'text walk'. This process entails getting to know the text prior to reading, speaking or writing, so as to engage the student more productively (see Vogt 2000).

Moreover, dealing with more than one language in a classroom requires the development of effective negotiating strategies among students and these should be a visible part of curricula and strategic planning at universities. To be successful in this enterprise, students need to be trained to be confident about the existing differences in communication. Students will also require orientation in the use of psychological and sociolinguistic resources to enable them to negotiate such differences successfully. To achieve this calls for embracing parallel pedagogic objectives. In addition to developing mastery in the target language, there is need to develop a multilingual repertoire of codes amongst our students in which bilingual policy must be additive in orientation which forms a framework in which both the home language and English are valued. In a subtractive mentality, the home language is seen as one of limited use, serving as a gateway to the mainstream language. In short, the development of metalingual awareness is necessary.

Multilingual pedagogy can only be meaningful with proper assessment strategies. As Foucault (1979) suggests, assessment is always a political act, a way of exercising power and control. All testing draws on specific ideologies and is embedded within specific cultural and pedagogic traditions. In brief, this shores up the argument that assessment practices for multilinguals need to orient towards principles of linguistic diversity, intercommunication and multicultural appreciation whilst striking the correct

the balance between language proficiency and content proficiency. Performance of multilinguals must be interpreted as a continuum of language acquisition so that contextual factors and differences in students' literacy levels are taken into account. This shift in focus will lay more emphasis on formative assessment practices. Formative assessment (constant evaluation of the student's learning that help shape pedagogical practices and curricula, and which is enabling and constructive to the student) should lay the ground for effective summative assessment of uncompromising standard. Flexible assessment strategies are fundamentally in the interest of the student if he or she is given the opportunity to demonstrate his or her academic achievement in content areas in a preferred language. Finally, assessment in a multilingual domain of learning should gravitate away from exclusive testing in print and embrace multimodal forms of testing. This strategy will give the emergent bilingual much more opportunity to work to his strength in demonstrating his capacity in specific learning areas.

In conclusion, much more research needs to be done to effect a transition from monolingual practices to bilingual ones. We require curricular, pedagogical and assessment practices that respond to the challenges of multilingual education and that derive from our unique contextual variables. We have to create the opportunities for both faculty and students to develop multiple understandings about languages and cultures that foster tolerance and appreciation for human diversity.

Bilingual education is not a one size fits all phenomenon. Research also needs to be prioritized in regard to the role of translanguaging, code switching, the tolerance level of errors and the logistics of team teaching in a multilingual learning and teaching domain. A major hurdle is the need to develop scientific academic registers in our indigenous languages to enable teaching and learning in the sciences at university. This perceived lack, together with the disconcerting lack of sufficient reference material available in the indigenous languages is an obstacle for indigenous language acceptance and growth at universities.

A major concern is the cost implications associated with multilingual education. In this matter we have to take a long term view. Cost benefit calculations will be offset by enhanced earning potential of students with multilingual proficiency. In this sense, it becomes a viable investment for the State in its most valuable of resources; its people.

Multilingualism is a crucial platform for preserving our cultural heritage. Indeed, the most obvious marker of identity of a community is first and foremost its language. Consequently, there must be support for all the languages spoken in South Africa. However, it must be borne in mind that language revitalization and maintenance can only occur through use. The more opportunities we create for the use of indigenous languages, the more successful we will be in validating their importance. South Africans have to recognize that language development is a continuous process that occurs throughout our lifetime and is recursive and circular. In that sense, we are all language learners, under certain conditions, with certain people (Makoni & Pennycook 2006:59).

Establishing multilingual domains at universities and schools is a value laden enterprise, precisely because language has much more than a semiotic and symbolic function. It also has a rhetorical function which is used to discursively construct identity and solidarity. As South Africans, we have to reinvent ourselves as users of multiple languages. The former colony must have the will and determination to decolonize and embrace the languages of our people by strategically marking it in the forefront of the nation's consciousness and as the cornerstone of our language policy. Our language strategy must convincingly align with the interests of commerce, industry and education. Graduates nurtured in multilingual practices will be culturally rich, linguistically competent, socially sensitive and better positioned to grow our economy, cultural heritage and knowledge systems. Academic achievement in two or more languages must be encouraged. It is time that South Africans reap the benefits of multiple ways of knowing the self and recognizing the fact that one language cannot reflect the linguistic complexity of the world. As we march through the 21st century, we have to have the sense to recognize that the rainbow nation is more than an ideological construct, that it serves more than a symbolic function. The rainbow nation, in all its diversity, in all its multiple tongues, represents a fabulous opportunity for the cultivation of a linguistic ecology that will deepen our democracy and establish the conditions for economic prosperity. It is time that all stakeholders acted on the premise that a monolingual view of modernization is no longer tenable.

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