Language and Apartheid: The Power of Minorities

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Language is never neutral, and in a country such as South Africa with its long history of political struggle, language will be all the more tied in to existing power relationships. Today, after the transition to democracy, structures forged under apartheid still exist and language is one of the means by which these continue to be perpetuated. Hence one of the urgent tasks of a future language policy is to clarify power relationships which are underpinned by language and in this way to open these up for change.

However, to date no adequate model of the 'power of language', a precondition for such an analysis, has become available. Even though the topic of language and power has over the last ten years become a long overdue focus of discussion among some linguists -see for instance the investigations by Andersen (1988), Bourdieu (1991), Fairclough (1989), Kachru (1986), Kramarae et al. (1984) and Wodak (1989) most of these authors have not attempted to clarify the notion of power from a theoretical point of view, and have used substantially different approaches, which renders comparison difficult. This becomes less surprising when one turns to the neighbouring disciplines of sociology and politics, for even theoreticians such as Lukes (1974), Galbraith (1986), Foucault (1984, 1986) and Connolly (1983) have not succeeded in defining the notion of 'power' unequivocally. Indeed, Connolly (1983:149-150) concludes that the notion of power is 'essentially contested' and that a generally accepted definition of power is unlikely. Hence it seems appropriate, when considering the 'power of language', to admit the problems of definition and the contested nature of 'power', so as to turn this into an advantage by considering different perspectives on the 'power of language'.

On the basis of these considerations I draw the following conclusions (see de Kadt 1991 for a detailed discussion):

1. In spite of the suggestive power of the phrase `power of language`, language in itself never possesses power. Rather it is individual languages, in their individual societal locus, which exercise power—and this power is a function of the roles of these languages in 'their' society· a language mediates the power relationships of its social context.

2. Three aspects of the 'power of language' can be differentiated. On the one hand, the 'overt' exercise of power (Lukes 1974:24) results in the 'pragmatic' and the 'symbolic' power of language. A language has pragmatic power insofar as it is used as means of communication (in the widest sense of the word) in a society, and the domains of usage rather than the simple number of speakers will give the clearest indication of pragmatic power. A language has symbolic power insofar as it is esteemed in its social context. This symbolic power draws on the emotive and symbolic aspects of language and can also be negative in impact. On the other hand the 'covert' exercise of power (Lukes 1974:24) results in what will here be termed the 'signitive' power of language, a power which language exercises over its speakers. This type of power is linked to the representation of 'reality' by language. In daily use values and concepts—indeed, an interpretation of world—are deposited in a language and perpetuate themselves. Anyone who uses this language adopts these values and concepts as well usually unwittingly. In this way language contributes towards constituting the apparently 'personal' world view of each subject.

This is in brief the model of the 'power of language', on which the following analysis is based. The focus will be on changing power relationships in a changing multilingual society. To this end two of the languages spoken in South Africa, Afrikaans and German, will be discussed To what extent and in what ways are these minority languages?

Afrikaans and its future prospects in South Africa has featured prominently in newspaper and journal articles over the last five years. In particular I have drawn on *Beeld, Rapport, Die Burger, Die Volksblad, Weekly Mail and Guardian* and *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (Albrecht 1992, anonymous 1994; Coetzee/Mare 1993, Degenaar 1994; De Jong 1992; Swanepoel 1995) as well as the numerous scientific publications (e g Alexander 1989, 1994; Coetzee 1990; Du Plessis 1992; Heugh 1995; Kotze 1995a, 1995b; McCormick 1995; Pokpas/Van Gensen 1992; Ponelis 1994; Reagan 1995; Stone 1995; Swanepoel 1992, Van Heerden 1994; Van Rensburg 1992; Webb 1992, 1995). My point of departure is the period leading up to 1992.

A first difficulty of interpretation reveals the centrality of considerations of power in the debate. In nearly all the documents discussing Afrikaans or the future of Afrikaans, the word 'Afrikaans' is used with two different meanings: at times the language as a whole is meant, at times—without this being mentioned—only one variety of Afrikaans, only 'Standard Afrikaans', the variety used in the public domain. It is always necessary to ascertain the exact meaning of the word 'Afrikaans' in its particular context, for it is not Afrikaans as such which has power (as implied by the unqualified use of 'Afrikaans'), rather it is Standard Afrikaans which has power. A second difficulty is the one-sidedness of the sources: with some few exceptions it is the promoters and users of Standard Afrikaans who debate the future of Afrikaans. This bias is a further indication of the power of Standard Afrikaans as sustained by a well-developed infrastructure. Every analysis of the power of Afrikaans—and, clearly, this present one as well—cannot but pay greater attention to Standard Afrikaans rather than to the non-standard varieties. By merely participating in the debate the existing discourse structures are utilised and hence the existing power structures once again perpetuated.

The power of Afrikaans during apartheid was characterised by an imbalance between pragmatic and symbolic power. The clear and detailed summary of numbers of speakers and domains of use by Webb, Dirven and Kock (1995:25-68) demonstrates the language's pragmatic power—with the reservation that the authors are actually referring to Afrikaans as a whole only when the general statistics on number of speakers etc. are presented. Once domains of usage are discussed—and as noted above it is the domains which really inform as to the pragmatic power of a language—the reference is to Standard Afrikaans. Clearly the use of Afrikaans prescribed by law for the public domains (politics, public service, law-courts, television and radio including advertising which is broadcast) is not only a matter of status or 'freedom, rights and privileges' (vryheid, regte en voorregte) (Webb et al. 1995:46), but also of the economic protection of (some) speakers of (Standard) Afrikaans. The use of Afrikaans as a language of technology and science draws on some forty years' work at developing the requisite scientific-technical terminology. The numerous language organisations such as the Akademie, the FAK etc. which continue to watch over the interests of Afrikaans recall the earlier roles of the all-important language movements and the substantial financial input required for any language development. The existence of a developed language variety such as Standard Afrikaans presupposes economic and commercial interests which are in a position and willing to carry at least part of the costs.

Nevertheless the pragmatic power of (Standard) Afrikaans in the 1980s showed significant gaps, most noticeably in education: very few black pupils used the language as medium of instruction at school. The much-

discussed symbolic power of Afrikaans provides an explanation. Through the perceived link to Afrikaner nationalism, Standard Afrikaans has been politicised to such an extent that, following on the events of 1976, a neutral use of the language is no longer possible: whoever is not explicitly against it, creates the appearance of being for it. The symbolic meaning of Afrikaans—and hence its symbolic power—is similarly polarised, leading either to passionate identification or to an equally strong rejection. For the Afrikaner nationalist, Afrikaans, the successful symbol of Afrikaner identity, became the mythologised 'language miracle', and in Afrikaner thought was depoliticised. Those, on the other hand, who experienced on a daily base the effects of Afrikaner politics, rejected together with this depoliticisation Afrikaans itself as the 'language of the oppressor'. The clash of two so strongly felt interpretations led at times to vehement reactions: some felt their own identity endangered through the rejection of their language, others withdrew from the language by all possible means. This clash finally triggered off the Soweto-riots in 1976.

There has been much discussion of the pragmatic and symbolic power of Afrikaans, albeit in somewhat other terms; but as yet little consideration of the 'signitive' power of Afrikaans, doubtless because this is exercised covertly. Yet the confusion mentioned above between 'Afrikaans' and 'Standard Afrikaans' is a clear instance of signitive power. In that this confusion can only be avoided by a very conscious critical awareness, often leading to what one feels is clumsiness and redundancy in expression, language—and discourse—exercises power over its users. Only recently have South Africans begun to investigate the 'apartheid experience of world' and its reflexion in South African languages. Here too it is doubtless also the polarisation around Afrikaans as discussed above which has led to such completely different results: the book-length investigation by Dirven (1995) comes to the 'extremely surprising conclusion that apartheid ideology has found no reflection in Afrikaans metaphors ...' (die uiters verrassende slotsom dat die apartheidsideologie geen neerslag gevind het in Afrikaanse metafore ... nie) (Swanepoel 1995:48), whereas van Heerden (1994) focuses on racial pejoratives as used in Afrikaans literature and the impossibility of simply 'disinfecting' (1994:71) works of literature by replacing these words. It would seem likely that the 'apartheid experience of world' would involve a tendency to create human relationships on the basis of race and of difference rather than of similarity. However, it is possible that precisely the political exposure of Afrikaans (in contrast to other languages, which might more easily be felt to be neutral) may contribute to creating an awareness of the language's signitive power—even if almost exclusively with those critical of the system. For example the Afrikaans authoress Marianne de

Jong, musing on her contradictory relationship to her own language, has expressed such an awareness very clearly:

> In my academic work psychoanalysis taught me that it is language which precedes the individual, which can never belong to him because he or she, the individual, belongs from birth to the language. When I learn to say 'I', I also learn 'I child', 'I daughter of my mother' and 'I female' In Afrikaans we also learnt 'I white' [One could doubtlessly add: 'I white' or 'I black' or 'I coloured'] And so I experience my love for the language which I speak as ambiguous I love it because it gives me identity, but I have to be distrustful because it constantly tries to make decisions for me, because it constantly tries to make me forget that its truths and values are full of history So to have a mother tongue means for me to protest in my language against my language ¹.

This type of thinking points to the urgent need to emancipate Standard Afrikaans from apartheid politics—and this, as van Heerden (1994) has pointed out, is only possible if one comes to terms with history which cannot but leave its tracks in language.

In terms of the official language policy proclaimed in 1994, South Africa now has 11 official languages, and the Constitution is to safeguard the linguistic rights of the individual. Hitherto the reality of this policy—guidelines for its implementation are presently being developed—has proved to be an increasing dominance of English, in the context of which Afrikaans has already suffered substantial restrictions of its pragmatic power. For instance, the politics of the country are increasingly being conducted in English, in public and in the ministries. It is not a future role of Afrikaans which is being denied, it is the claim to a special status. Hence the future of Afrikaans is likely to be on a regional basis. This is confirmed by the new television policy announced by the SABC, which will reduce the exposure of Afrikaans considerably—and this will in the long run certainly have consequences for usage patterns of Afrikaans. Just as foreseen by the participants in the reformist 'gesprek oor Afrikaans' of the 1980s, the pragmatic power of Afrikaans will diminish substantially

The reaction of mother tongue speakers of Afrikaans to these changes is also completely polarised. With the initiation of the 'Stigting vir

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¹ Die psigoanaliese het my in my akademiese werk geleer dat taal dit is wat die individu voorafgaan, wat nooit aan hom kan behoort nie omdat hy of sy, die individu, vanaf geboorte aan die taal behoort As ek 'ek' leer sê, leer ek ook 'ek kind', 'ek dogter van my ma' en 'ek vroulik' In Afrikaans het ons ook geleer 'ek wit' Daarom ervaar ek my liefde vir die taal wat ek praat as dubbelsinnig. Ek het dit lief omdat dit my identiteit gee, maar ek moet dit met wantroue bejeen omdat dit gedurig probeer om my te bepaal, omdat dit gedurig probeer om my te laat vergeet dat sy waarhede en waardes vol geskiedenis sit. Om 'n moedertaal te hê, beteken daarom dit vir my om in my taal teen my taal te protesteer (De Jong 1992:31)

Afrikaans' in 1992 (generously supported by Afrikaans printing houses such as Perskor and representatives of the commercial sector such as Sanlam), a 'Third Language Movement' has begun, following a well-tried tradition, but once again raising the question of the link between language and privilege. The Stigting has been very active, firstly in not missing any opportunity to defend and promote the use of Afrikaans (i.e. supporting its pragmatic power), generally in terms of the language rights clauses of the Interim Constitution. Individual protests are organised around particular issues, the topic of Afrikaans is kept ever-visible in the press. More significantly, however, a new vision of Afrikaans has been proclaimed: an attempt is being made to substitute a new symbolic meaning for the former contested one. As suggested by a small minority of Afrikaans-speakers during the 1980s, who used the concepts of 'opening' (oopstelling) and 'democratisation' (demokratisiering), Afrikaans is now being presented as the 'friendly language for everyday use' (die vriendelike gebruikstaal), in the expectation that in this way Afrikaans will become accessible for all speakers.

It is doubtful whether the symbolic power of Afrikaans can be strengthened in this way. The 'Third Language Movement' may be very visible, but it is also very lonely; it represents a minority of Afrikaans-speakers. In the progressive language debate, on the other hand, Afrikaans is considered simply as one language among many and so is hardly mentioned. Hein Willemse has pointed out that the promoters of Afrikaans are in a considerable dilemma:

> The languages of the blacks are not lobbying for themselves. So when Afrikaans begins to lobby for itself, it is accused of exclusivity and referred back to the other languages. But when the champions (of Afrikaans) turn to the other languages, there is no purposeful programme which they could join [2]

The urge to reduce the status of Afrikaans (and not, for example, of English) seems to be directed primarily against Standard Afrikaans, in that this variety has been experienced as an imposed minority language. It could be objected—as Ponelis (1994) has recently argued—that every official language has to be an standard language, and that hence the claims to power made on behalf of and by means of the 'culture variety of Afrikaans' are indeed legitimate. Such reasoning ignores the degree of politicisation of Standard Afrikaans. In spite of the subsequent attempts to sanitise this variety as a 'language miracle' and a 'friendly language', it cannot be easily

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[2] Die swart tale lobby nie vir hulself nie. Dus as Afrikaans vir haarself begin lobby, word sy van eksklusiwiteit beskuldig en na die ander tale verwys. Draai die stryders na die ander tale, is daar geen doelgerigte program om mee saam te werk nie' (quoted in anonymous 1994).

forgotten by outsiders at least that Standard Afrikaans was conceived and developed as an exclusive language and with decided political aims. What at first served the empowering of a minority cannot but turn against the same minority, given a change of political constellation. Even though the pragmatic power of Afrikaans has been reduced, history—and to be specific a history of empowerment and disempowerment—has left its traces in Standard Afrikaans; and history cannot be undone simply by declaring one symbol out-of-date and proposing a new (and equally depoliticised) symbol.

Afrikaans is not in itself a minority language; as we are constantly reminded, it has substantial numbers of mother tongue speakers. Yet, in that one variety was isolated and developed into a political instrument against a background of exclusivity, a potential majority language reshaped itself into a minority language and into one of the means through which the actual majority of the country was disempowered. Every attempt to perpetuate the special status of what is now indeed a minority language, and especially through what appears to be a further negation of history, will be only too likely to be understood by the formerly disempowered as a renewed attempt to perpetuate political privilege.

The second language to be discussed here is in every sense a minority language. During the first three hundred years of colonisation, most German-speakers arriving in South Africa were quickly assimilated; but especially in kwaZulu-Natal small rural communities came into being during the second half of the nineteenth century, some of which—unexpectedly—have retained the German language until today (see Bodenstein 1995; De Kadt 1995).

During the last fifty years, the pragmatic power of German has been greatly reduced by the removal of much of the earlier isolation of these settlements. At present these 'German-speakers' are typically multilinguals who use German in only a few domains: at home, for religious purposes and, to a limited extent, for schooling. Nevertheless, such retention of German over five or six generations is astonishing and must be attributed largely to its strong symbolic power: for these colonists it served to proclaim an own group identity. By means of German, these settlers felt able to distinguish themselves from other English-speaking colonists on the one hand, and from the Zulu-speaking indigenous inhabitants on the other. Tendencies and strategies discussed above become visible here as well: a polarisation in terms of otherness, and the mythologisation of language In the minds of its speakers, German became depoliticised and associated with 'eternal' values such as decency, diligence, conscientiousness, honesty, closeness to the soil and faith. That these values are themselves historically mediated and largely products of nineteenth century Germany becomes invisible, as well as the relocation of the German language to a new African context.

Why did these German colonists experience such a strong need to isolate themselves and perceive themselves as 'other'? Certainly, external factors must have contributed: it was whole families who emigrated and who settled in closed groups, and economically these colonists were able to be more or less self-sufficient. Doubtless the rising German nationalism of the nineteenth century played a role, as well as the substantial class difference between the English-speaking 'gentlemen farmers' and the North German peasants. But it would seem that the link between language and faith was decisive, as indicated by the fact that in each settlement the first communal buildings to be erected were always church and school. (Many of these settlers were indeed Lutheran missionaries.)

Two further factors then assisted the retention of this typically nineteenth century symbolism into the late twentieth century: the close links which were forged with Afrikaner Nationalism, and the economic power of modern Germany. A number of German-speakers became prominent in the economic and commercial sectors in South Africa. This was not unimportant as regards preventing linguistic assimilation: for example, when schooling was taken over by the provinces, four years of teaching in German were maintained and are still permitted today in so-called 'German primary schools'. Similarly, the 'German Festival Year 1992', commemorating the 'German contribution to the development of South Africa' (Lantern 1992:1; see also Pakendorf 1992) was supported by prominent industrial and commercial instances—as well as by the then Prime Minister.

Yet the new political dispensation will doubtless accelerate the trend towards assimilation which can already be observed. The language is rapidly losing its symbolic power, as increasing numbers of young people reject this value system as an anachronism. In this regard, too, reactions are polarising: some German-speakers are consciously rejecting the exclusivity implied by being a tiny linguistic minority and accept linguistic assimilation as inevitable, whereas other groupings are vigorously attempting to maintain this minority status. The Vryheid community for example has recently completed a self-funded school hostel solely for German-speaking children. But at this stage in South Africa's history, such attempts have little chance of success in the long run, and these communities too, are likely to assimilate linguistically over the next two generations. The clearest indication of this is the increasing trend towards marriages with speakers of other languages, and the gradual introduction of church services in English and Afrikaans.

The above article has analysed aspects of the power of two South African minority languages, Standard Afrikaans and German, as well as responses by speakers of these languages to the present period of social and political change. The choice of these two languages for discussion might well appear rather arbitrary, and indeed as once again contributing to the

perpetuation of presently existing linguistic power. Yet, for a historical linguist, Afrikaans and South African German are without doubt of significance, in that they have been involved in out of the ordinary linguistic developments in South Africa: on the one hand the emergence of a 'new language', the 'youngest Germanic language', Afrikaans, and on the other, the ongoing maintenance of a minority immigration language, German. Our consideration of recent trends would seem to indicate that the symbolic power of these two languages as offering a distinctive own identity, has been a crucial factor. Both languages became characterised by a high degree of polarisation into 'self' and 'other' and a refusal to dialogue in a meaningful way with this 'other'. The challenge of the new language policy has resulted in some renewed attempts at language maintenance, in which the old polarisation persists: openly in some German communities, and as a perhaps unrealised subtext among some speakers of Standard Afrikaans, in the attempt simply to submerge the past in a new symbolism.

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