Book Reviews

Language in South Africa:
A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Language in South Africa
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To a large extent, *Language in South Africa* is a revision of *Language and Social History* (1995), also edited by Rajend Mesthrie. Unlike the 1995 edition in which the articles were not arranged in any particular order, the twenty four chapters in *Language in South Africa* are organised under three main headings; namely, Part i: The main language groupings; Part ii: Language contact; and Part iii: Language planning, policy and education. Part ii is further sub-divided into the following: (a) Pidginisation, borrowing, switching and intercultural contact; (b) Gender, language change and shift; (c) New varieties of English; and (d) New urban codes. The format is 'partly historical and partly thematic' (Mesthrie 2002:3), thus reflecting both diachronic and synchronic perspectives of language development in South Africa.

The book covers a wide range of pertinent sociolinguistic issues that are currently under focus in South Africa. The chapters are well written. More importantly, they are generally written in a manner that is accessible to anybody who finds language issues intriguing. The essays that adopt a primarily

diachronic perspective (e.g. those on the Khoesan languages by Anthony Trail, and the Bantu languages by Robert Herbert and Richard Bailey) are perhaps more difficult to go through but only because of the extensive amount of data and the depth of analysis that they have to offer.

The book begins with a useful sociolinguistic overview of the South African context by the editor himself. It outlines the language and socio-historical profile of the South African population and offers language statistics from the 1996 census report. Mesthrie argues that the '1996 census showed an improvement in its language question over its predecessors' (2002:12), but concurs with Jean Maartens (1998:19) that census data has limitations. Mesthrie further comments that, 'The presentation of language demographics in abbreviated form should not be allowed to conceal the essentially dynamic nature of language use in any society' (Maartens 1998:19).

With respect to the contents of the book, a comparative analysis of the 1995 text and this one reveals that only a handful of the twenty-four chapters may be classified as new contributions. Notable amongst the new essays is Debra Aarons' and Philemon Akach's chapter on 'South African Sign Language'. It is an invaluable contribution since research in Sign Language is a neglected area. Moreover, research into this subject matter generally arises from a medical and para-medical perspective, and seldom from a sociolinguistic perspective. Aarons and Akach analyse South African Sign Language from a language variation perspective, an approach that is fresh and cognizant of the language rights of users of Sign Language.

Of the revised essays, some have been substantially reworked and updated. In the chapter 'The Bantu languages in South Africa', the authors, Herbert and Bailey, have developed chapters 2 and 3 of the 1995 text into a single chapter with some new data to produce a more coherent, comprehensive account. They have also included several new and current references. The result is a comprehensive, updated account of the Bantu languages in South Africa.

Keith Chick's 'Intercultural miscommunication in South Africa' is extensively amended from its earlier version in terms of content and format, and includes additional references and examples. The author approaches the issue of intercultural miscommunication, a frequently occurring phenomenon in our multicultural society, from an interactional sociolinguistics perspective which highlights the relationship between micro-level structural features of communication and macro-level contextual variables. According to Chick, research in this area is critical as it may go a long way in trying to unravel intercultural miscommunication and in suggesting solutions.

Robert Herbert's article 'The political economy of language shift: language and gendered ethnicity in a Thonga community' includes some of the material covered by Patrick Harries in the 1995 text. Herbert approaches the subject matter from both thematic as well as diachronic perspectives. He considers the socio-historical development of the language and, in so doing, undertakes to demystify the etymology debate of whether the language in question is Thonga or Tsonga. Of particular interest, though, is the way in which Herbert analyses the political and gender dimensions of language change using the Thonga community as a case in point. While research on bilingualism is an established area globally, there are very few studies that focus on 'sex-determined bilingualism' (Herbert 2002:320) with particular reference to the South African context. Herbert's challenging contribution to sociolinguistic studies paves the way for further research in an area that may be described as contentious.

The chapter on Black South African English (BSAE) by Vivian de Klerk and David Gough provides a good socio-historical account of the development of BSAE, and covers both the formal and functional features of this variety. The essay is, to some extent, a reconsideration of Qedusizi Buthelezi's paper which appeared in the 1995 text. De Klerk and Gough have consulted current references in order to present new material on the subject, and have supported their analysis with a number of interesting and relevant examples. Of importance, and reflecting the concerns of sociolinguists with the terminology, is the change in the title of the chapter from South African Black English to Black South African English. Similarly, the title of Mesthrie's article on 'Indian South African English' (2003:339) has changed from the earlier 'South African Indian English' (1995:251). Such changes signify a paradigm shift in the classification of language varieties, however, as was apparent at the 2003 Linguistic Society of Southern Africa Conference, opinion is still divided.

In the section on language planning, policy and education, Sally Murray's 'Language issues in South African education' and Kathleen Heugh's 'Recovering multilingualism: recent language policy developments' (an updated version of her 1995 essay) are particularly impressive. Both provide state of the art accounts of what is currently happening in this area. Mesthrie rightly describes Heugh's essay as a 'fitting way of rounding off this book by testing the heat generated at the linguistic fireplace' (2002:3).

New to the 2002 text is Sarah Slabbert and Rosalie Finlayson's article on 'Code-switching in South African townships'. Code-switching, a natural language contact phenomenon is a linguistic reality in the urban and urbanised

areas of South Africa. Research in this area therefore contributes significantly to an understanding of South Africa's highly complex multilingual, multicultural society. The authors have written widely on the subject and are therefore able to present a sound overview of code-switching. It is worth noting, however, that much of the information in this essay is not new. Sociolinguists familiar with this area of research would realise that some of the information presented in this chapter may be found in their earlier essays published in the *South African Journal of Linguistics* 1999 (19) and in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 1997 (125).

Of the essays which are superficial revisions of earlier versions there is the chapter on 'South African English' (SAE) which is basically a reprint of the article by the same author in the 1995 text. Taking into account the hegemonic role of English and the concomitant changes that occur almost daily with respect to this language variety, one wonders why there is a dearth of research with respect to South African English. Clearly one cannot assume that there has been no developments that have taken place in the last eight years. The author, Lass, himself stated in the 1995 text and again in this chapter that 'there has as yet been no really detailed investigation of morphosyntactic variables of L1 SAE of the sort there has been for phonological ones' (2002:124). He cites the work by Mesthrie and West (1995) as the only study that offers 'a historical framework for dialect syntax in South Africa'. In view of the above critique, one needs to question the nature of research that the various linguistics departments around the country are pursuing. It is incumbent upon linguists and sociolinguists to encourage and for themselves to pursue research in areas that will promote understanding of the society we live in and the sociolinguistic changes we are experiencing. More importantly, documentation of these changes is critical and scholars need to publish their work. There are, quite possibly, studies that have not been published. For instance, Rosalie Finlayson's chapter on 'Women's language of respect: *isihlonipho sabafazi*' is well written, however, information—such as that emanating from the research of the late Dr A.C.T. Mayekiso—which could have contributed significantly to this area of study is missing, perhaps because Mayekiso's work remains largely unpublished and inaccessible.

Mesthrie's 2002 compilation brings together key articles that capture the sociolinguistic complexity of our society. However, I am concerned about the eleven articles that are repetitions, with minor modifications, of those that appeared in the 1995 text. Elizabeth de Kadt's essay on 'German speakers in South Africa' is another case in point: she makes the relevant change in

nomenclature from southern Transvaal to Gauteng but offers the same statistics as she did in her article in the 1995 text. Language is fluid, and Edwards (1985:159) and others have thus argued that a static conception of language is simply unrealistic. In the eight years that have passed since the publication of *Language and Social History in South Africa*, the inevitable language changes ought to have been reflected.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, there is much to commend in the book: minor details, such as the use of endnotes rather than footnotes are appreciated as they do not distract the reader from the core content, as is the cover design with the various handprints symbolising the people whose languages are represented in the book. More importantly, Mesthrie's collection of articles by respected sociolinguists provides a good overview of language in South Africa which will be especially useful to those readers who are not familiar with the area. Specialists, on the other hand, may question the currency of much of the information contained in this book but will nevertheless value the wealth of new knowledge it offers.

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