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Bantu languages in education in South Africa: an overview. ***Ongekho akekho***! – the absentee owner

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Abstract

The main argument of this overview article is that the Bantu languages of South Africa should have a far more significant role in education. We contend that the strong preference for English as medium of instruction among black learners is largely responsible for their inadequate educational performance, particularly since most of these learners do not have the required skills in English. This is particularly the case in rural and township schools and in what we term ‘lower ex-model C schools’, given the socio-economic realities of the communities in which these schools are located. Were the Bantu languages used for learning and teaching purposes in an effective way, we suggest the educational outcomes of black learners would be significantly better. We accept, of course, that schools, especially secondary schools, cannot immediately implement a policy of using the Bantu languages as media of instruction. Several

research and development challenges need to be addressed for this to happen. These include: transforming the socio-political meanings attached to these languages; their further corpus development as well as their status, prestige, acquisition and usage development; the development and implementation of language-in-education policies which address the basic educational and sociolinguistic realities; and the effective distribution of information to school governing bodies about the issues relevant to the selection of a medium of instruction. In our view, South Africa will not become a developed, effectively multilingual and nationally integrated country if linguistic equity and parity of esteem are not established in a meaningful way for all official languages, which includes provision for their use as media of instruction throughout.

Keywords:

Notes

1. Despite the post-1994 commitment to establish non-racism in South Africa, race is still a reality in most public domains, including education. In this contribution, black South Africans will be distinguished from coloured, Indian and white South Africans, and the term ‘black schools’ will be used for schools in which the learners are overwhelmingly black.

2. Written reply by the Minister of Education to a question in the National Assembly, 19 June 2006.

3. TIMSS also collected data in 2003 and 2007. South Africa was not a participant in 2007. South Africa's results in 2003 were: maths: 264/800 and for science: 244/800.

4. Fifteen countries were involved in the SACMEQ research: Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zanzibar and Zimbabwe. See http://www.sacmeq.org/indicators.htm

5. These are the results for Grade 12 history ‘Paper 1’ examination in each case. The Grade 12 examination comprises two papers of three hours each, requiring extended

essay writing.

6. In South Africa, the term ‘Bantu languages’ is generally not used, because of the association of the concept Bantu with apartheid. The Bantu languages are thus referred to as ‘African languages’. Internationally, however, linguists use the term Bantu languages. This practice will be followed in this contribution, since its reading audience is presumed to be the community of linguists.

7. For learners with a Bantu language as primary language, English is a second language in regions where English is part of their daily lives and where they are thus meaningfully exposed to it. But in environments where learners are not exposed to English except in classrooms, English needs to be regarded as a ‘third’ (or even foreign) language.

8. South African sociolinguists prefer to use the term ‘primary language’ or ‘home language’ in preference to ‘mother tongue’, which is problematical in South Africa. Besides its political connotation (having been a central concept in the philosophy of separate development – apartheid), it is often difficult to determine a person's ‘mother tongue’ since children in linguistically mixed homes and in similarly mixed communities spontaneously acquire different languages at the same time.

9. The views expressed in this article are based on the principles articulated in the South African Constitution (of 1996) and the Language-in-Education policy of the Department of Education (of 1997), and are supported by empirical data. We acknowledge, though, that alternative views and positions are possible.

10. First language speakers of English generally reside in urban areas.

11. This information is based on a report in Rekord East, 25 January 2008, p. 1.

12. Government is supposed to compensate schools for learners exempted from school fees, but, for various reasons, this does not happen systematically (as commented on in interviews with various school principals). Since 2008, as an acknowledgment of this new state of affairs, quintiles – the classification of schools into categories according to which state funding is allocated – are based on the socio-economic status of the school learners' families and no longer on the infrastructure and environment of the school.

13. Response by the Minister of Education to a question in the National Assembly, 20 September 2005.

14. Response by the Minister of Education to a question in the National Assembly on 9 March 2007. The information provided in Tables 1 and 2 does not distinguish between primary and secondary schools. African languages are supported only in the first three years of primary education.

15. LingbeT is a project of the Centre for Research in the Politics of Language (CentRePoL), University of Pretoria. It aims to describe the linguistic realities in black schools in South Africa. Six schools in the Tshwane Metropolitan region (three primary, three secondary) are involved in the project, led by Refilwe Ramagoshi (African Languages, University of Pretoria), assisted by Nthatisi Bulane (Llacan, CNRS).

16. Note in this regard the results for the English First Additional Language (Higher Grade) in the final 2006 November exam from schools involved in a Department of Education project on the usefulness of translated exam papers: the average mark for Paper 1 was 25.3% and for Paper 2 was 23.4% (Pare and Webb 2007). Note also the results of tests performed by Hough & Horne Consultants to determine the linguistic skills of the top 258 applicants for bursaries to study engineering: only 4% of them were literate at Grade 12 level (Rademeyer 2007).

17. This failure occurred after mother-tongue education was reduced from five to three years as a result of the Soweto protests against Bantu education. See Heugh (2002) on the serious educational consequences of that decision.

18. The Language, Effective Education and Economic Outcomes project. See Webb and Grin (2000) for more details.

19. The situation regarding television and radio may have changed over recent years due to the increase in television soapies and radio stations in Bantu languages.

20. It remains to be seen whether the regular use of Zulu on public occasions by South Africa's newly elected President, Jacob Zuma, will change this perception.

21. Several non-government organisations have established projects directed at addressing the problems of complexly multilingual classes, such as the Home Language Project. It is necessary to document all these projects and to list the successes and problems encountered. See also Setati (2003), and Setati and Adler (2001).

22. A useful example is provided by the work done by Pare, Mohau, Mojalefa, Ntake and Harding on the development of the Sepedi/Northern Sotho Wikipedia. Currently, there are 230 articles in Sepedi. According to a Wikimedia site, 'Most of the other South African national languages also have a Wiki' (http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Requests_for_new_languages/Wikipedia_Sepedi).

23. Further information on these organisations can be accessed through their websites: http://www.acalan.org/ and http://www.praesa.org.za/

Additional information

Notes on contributors

Vic Webb
Ongekho akekho is Zulu for Who is not there is not there, suggesting that one looses when one cannot claim one's right of possession in person.

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