

# The power of language the language of power

*Neville Alexander*

The history of humanity is not only a history of socioeconomic activity. It is also a history of semiotic activity. In South Africa, where “race” has been the main ideological prism through which people have perceived their realities, this insight has tended to be ignored even by intellectuals working in the social sciences. However, although the racial fault line was the most prominent feature of the South African socio-political landscape for most of the 20th century, there were occasions when the language issue erupted with volcanic menace to remind the world that this is a country that cannot be viewed in simple black-and-white terms.

It should be stated quite clearly, that it is not true that languages simply develop “naturally”, as it were. They are formed and manipulated within definite limits to suit the interests of different groups of people. Indeed, it is a fact that in any modern state, whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged by governments, languages are always planned, in that legislation prescribes, often in great detail, where and how one or more languages are to be used. This is universal practice and it has significant consequences in critical social domains such as education.

For human beings to produce the means of subsistence they have to cooperate and in order to do so, they have to communicate. Language is the main instrument of communication at the disposal of human beings; consequently, the specific language(s) in which the production processes take place become(s) the language(s) of power. To put it differently, if one does not have the requisite command of the language(s) of production, one is automatically restricted in one’s options as regards access to employment and all that implies in a state where employment opportunities are hierarchically structured and differentially rewarded. At this point, the relationship between language policy, class and power ought to become intuitively obvious.

The other source of the power of language is its function as a transmission mechanism of “culture” or, more popularly, its role in the formation of individual and social identities. Being able to use the language(s) one has the best command of in any situation is an empowering factor and, conversely, not being able to do so is necessarily disempowering. The self-esteem, self-confidence, potential creativity and spontaneity that come with being able to use the language(s) that have shaped one from early childhood (one’s “mother tongue”) is the foundation of all democratic politics and institutions. To be denied the use of this language is the very meaning of oppression. It is this aspect of the language question that has fuelled and often justified ethnicnationalist and separatist movements during the last three centuries.

The relevant essential proposition is simple enough. It states that in a multilingual society, it is in everyone’s interest to learn the dominant language (of power), since this will help to provide equal opportunities in the labour market as well as in other markets. In post-colonial Africa, this has led to the almost complete marginalisation of the local languages of the people and the valorisation of English, French and Portuguese in the relevant African states. Indeed, in most other African states, the distinction between “official”, i.e. European, and “national”(African) languages ironically highlights in an unintended manner the social distance between the elite and the masses of the people. Because of the role model status of the middle class in most societies, the monolingual habitus becomes generalised in such a manner that the vast majority of the people come to believe that all that matters is knowledge of English in so-called anglophone Africa. This utterly disempowering disposition assumes the character of a social pathology, one which I have called the “Static Maintenance

Syndrome". Postapartheid South Africa is, in spite of numerous improvements on its predecessor, a textbook example of this paradox. For, whereas in apartheid South Africa, the rulers could afford to, and did, approach African languages as though they had no economic or cultural value, in the new South Africa, this attitude is clearly self-limiting and self-defeating, if not self-destructive. Unless we are prepared to grant that we are simply trotting along the same footpaths as those pioneered by the neo-colonial states after 1960, where the indigenous languages of Africa were not seen as resources but as problems. One of the most serious strategic errors in this respect has been the failure to introduce mother tongue-based education.

However, unless African languages are given market value, i.e. unless their instrumentality for the processes of production, exchange and distribution is enhanced, no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high status functions and, thus, eventual escape from the hegemony of English. An articulated programme of job creation and employment on the basis of language proficiencies would, in the South African context, also serve as an organic affirmative action programme, one that would not have the unintended consequence of perpetuating and entrenching divisive racial identities inherited from the apartheid past. At a more this new phase of the development and use of African languages in high-status functions should be approached and understood against the background of the strategies, activities and programmes of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), viewed as an instrument of the African Renaissance and of the cultural revolution on the continent during this, the "African century", both of which were so hopefully proclaimed by President Mbeki at the end of the 20th century. As a specialised bureau of the African Union, ACALAN is beginning to influence decisively the direction and modalities of language policies on the continent. The success of ACALAN will have direct and enduring consequences for all African countries, not least for the Republic of South Africa.

The key challenges that have to be addressed at the beginning of the 21st century are the increasing hegemony of English, the need to raise literacy levels by means of, among other things, the successful implementation of appropriate language medium policies in the schools and universities and, closely related, the need to demonstrate the positive relationship between functional multilingualism and economic efficiency and productivity. The inculcation and nurturing of a culture of reading in African languages is the key to all of these issues. The challenge, however, is not only to the political, business and cultural leadership of the country. Above all, it is high time that the intelligentsia begin to move out of their comfort zones and accept that language policy, class and power are tightly interwoven and that unless we devise our own agendas in the interest of our people as a whole, we are willy-nilly carrying out others' possibly nefarious agendas.

Volltext unter: <http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/apartheid/alexanderp2.pdf>