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Michel Lafon

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Language policy and nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa

Michel Lafon [a]
[a] CentRePol Center for Research on the Politics of Language, University of Pretoria,

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Book Review

Language policy and nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa. Jon Orman. Springer Verlag. 2008. ISBN: 9781402088902. pp. 201.

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Orman's neat volume is quite an achievement in a field hit over the years by a flurry of publications. In a dense 180-page narrative, organised in a classical dissertation plan, it succeeds in covering comprehensively the core theoretical and methodological aspects of the topic at hand (Chapters 2 & 3), while describing the issue as it dramatically unfolded in South Africa over different periods of time (Chapters 4 to 6). Thus, the South African case is put in perspective, by drawing examples from various situations in the world, and further illustrating the country's exemplary value on how language policy may, in many diverse and deep ways, impact on nation-building. Readers will certainly enjoy the openness of the approach. Language issues are systematically discussed, taking into account their interconnections to other domains of social life, with the author justly deriding a trend he labels 'linguicentrism' (p. 1), that sees language issues as insulated. The extension of the bibliography (cer. 450 titles alluded to or quoted from in the text itself) is testimony to the wide range of scholarship involved.

The style is always intense and precise, avoiding convoluted sentences and complicated terminology, without giving way to over-simplification. The author is clearly a master in communication – someone with experience in teaching and presenting, who has the ability to put his ideas across. The reading, therefore, is pleasant and instructive, both in terms of content and form.

Although the two main parts speak to each other, they can also be read independently. I will thus confine myself to the chapters dealing with South Africa proper. Although I do find grounds for some critical remarks, these should not be seen as undermining the overall quality of the book, which may be considered crucial reading in the field. Obviously, these comments refer only to that part of the book under review.

Regarding the specific study of South African language policy, Orman has chosen to dedicate special attention to the changing status of Afrikaans, which is made the object of a full chapter (Chapter 5). Orman summarises brilliantly the changing position of

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the language since the British occupation of the Cape in the 1800s. He further offers insights on what a really diverse language policy could involve, promoting a full-blown plurilingualism that includes African languages, and not what Louw (2004, 320) calls the apartheid 'intense' version of it. A criterion of achievement would be for Afrikaans speakers – particularly the 'socially marginalized' (p. 173) (read mostly Western Cape coloured), to feel fully included in the new democratic South Africa (pp. 129, 137). There is indeed much value in the argument that only when Afrikaans is viewed without prejudice, merely as one shade in the linguistic rainbow shining over the southern tip of the continent, will the language scene in South Africa be purported to have truly overcome its onerous past. Dealing extensively with Afrikaans is unavoidable in a text concerned with issues around language and nationhood in South Africa. My contention is the fact that African languages enter the debate mostly via the discussion on Nguni and Sotho standardisation, as advocated by Nhlapo (1944, 1945) in the 1940s, an idea revisited by Alexander (1992, 62 & 63) in the 1990s. Beyond this mention, Orman's point of departure for the African languages is essentially the apartheid-era situation which cemented a narrowly ethnic approach to the living reality of language varieties. Still, these languages had undergone significant changes before apartheid, stemming from both internal and external agencies that brought about promising developments not devoid of a lasting impact on ethnicity. I feel that this aspect could have been given more consideration. In this sense, Orman's book regretfully does not depart from previous works on the South African language scene which dwell at length on Afrikaans, but under-discuss the making of the African languages. The ratio here is a couple of pages as opposed to close to 30. This option is unfortunate, as an analysis of the ethnicity brought forth by the construction of the African languages in South Africa, as well as an assessment of that legacy, researched as sharply as the other topics in the book are, undoubtedly would have offered original insights and suggestions to a terrain rarely ploughed. If African languages in present-day South Africa are to be given their dues, there is a need to re-assess the past, overcome the apartheid episode and take stock of the truly promising developments that flourished in the time of the Union until they were smothered under apartheid, 'censored and sponsored' as Swanepoel (1998, 19) so aptly puts it. The complex history of those languages is highly relevant for the debate on their present role and place in the country – as much, arguably, as that of Afrikaans. It is high time the apartheid episode is dismissed.

Orman's perception, announced in the foreword (p. 1) and again more at length in the conclusion (pp. 172–173) after it is developed in Chapter 4, is that post-apartheid-era language policy marked the elitist and top-down approach preferred by the powers that be (or were, viz. Mandela and Mbeki's governments). The policy proved to be profoundly unequal to the promises of democracy even as they were embedded in the (then) recently proclaimed constitution. Orman speaks of overt and covert language policy to describe the discrepancy between lofty declarations and real practices. It is difficult to differ from him on his generally pessimistic assessment of the situation.

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Orman explains the lack of attention to the language issue during the Mbeki era as being a result of the ANC-in-exile concern for English only, the top-down approach and the self-localisation of present-day elite in Western-inspired globalisation (see also Louw 2004 for a concise statement of the same). Notwithstanding the relevance of these arguments, I would like to add another line of explanation which takes a more political angle.

It is known that the multilingual policy, as defined in the constitution (RSA 1996), largely resulted from the Nationalists' defence of the status of Afrikaans. The first years of its implementation have shown the readiness of Afrikaans pressure groups to use the respective provisions to support their language. Can we surmise that, for political leaders who still nurture a strong antipathy for that language, it was necessary to see it significantly diminished in status before they could think of putting in place measures to promote linguistic diversity that could have the undesirable side effect of providing further ammunitions to the 'enemy'? This scaling down process seems to characterise particularly what happened in the judiciary. After Afrikaans was discontinued as a language of record, leading to a *de facto* English monolingualism (see Orman, p. 134), in an apparent reversal (but possibly in a semi-planned move), all official languages are now admitted, suggesting that Afrikaans had to be downgraded before a change could be implemented. Far from undermining civil society and bringing forth homogenisation (ibid., 35), the levelling down of Afrikaans with the other dominated languages appears then as a condition for a wider opening of officialdom to linguistic diversity.

Oman's infatuation with the issue of Afrikaans may have further blinded him to significant changes that, by 2007 (probable end-date of the manuscript) were clearly in progress. One important flaw is the absence of any allusion to the 2003 Language Bill. It is my contention that the hype provoked by the Bill (never tabled in parliament) announced a gradual shift in government policy, which henceforward became more concerned with African languages. It seems that government chose to resort to existing laws as well as other channels, to bring a degree of linguistic transformation. This is instanced in a number of domains (see Lafon 2006) of which the SABC (the national broadcaster) is one such example.

Orman paints the SABC as a gate-keeper of the dominance of English (pp. 94 & 95). He is not wrong. Indeed, in June 2009 the website still contained no other language (as Orman had already observed). However, an important and potentially far-reaching policy change occurred that Orman – mostly concerned with the diminishing place of Afrikaans – seems to ignore. Since 2004, the SABC has accepted scripts submitted in African languages (statement of an SABC representative, Wiser conference 'Township now', June 2004). Prior to that date, manuscripts had to be translated into English and/or Afrikaans, to be assessed. This new approach was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the production of serials using only or mostly African languages. In the same vein,

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since 2003, the SABC has broadcast news in *all* eleven languages, adding Venda, Swati and Tsonga for the first time (Moyo 2002, 151).

The place afforded educational issues in the book is also disappointingly rather limited, whether in the historical background or the present-day context. For example, it does not mention dual- and parallel-medium schools (English/Afrikaans) that constituted a significant number of schools in the post-Union period (pre-apartheid) (see Malherbe 1977). This legacy contributed to the framing of the present-day language-in-education policy (cf. DOE 1997). It therefore comes as no surprise that the new focus on African languages brought forth by the Department of Education is overlooked. Still, it is a very significant move, and a move with huge potential.

The overlooking of new trends – some at least conspicuous by 2007 – may be the result of the author's absence from the field. If indeed Orman's direct hands-on knowledge of South Africa is limited to the time he spent here in 2005, he did an impressive job of gathering and assimilating information. It is indeed very difficult to grasp such a fluid and changing situation in such a very short span of time.

Michel Lafon
Cnrs-Llacan-IFAS
Research Fellow CentRePol Center for Research on the Politics of Language
University of Pretoria
Michel.Lafon@up.ac.za & lafon@vjf.cnrs.fr

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