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

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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.

Introduction

Educationally, and consequently also economically, South Africa is confronted with serious problems. In 2005, for example, 12.9% of black South Africans[1] who were 20 years of age or older had received no education (South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) 2006, 10), and according to the Minister of Education,[2] only

21.9% of those learners who started with Grade 1 (generally six years of age) in 1994 completed Grade 12 (generally 18 years of age). Similarly, South African participants in the *Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study* (*TIMSS*)[3] in 1999 (7651 14–15-year-old learners in 183 schools) obtained an average score out of 800 of 275 for mathematics and 243 for science, well below the international means (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Acheivment (IAEEA) 1999).

The South African results were lower than those of Morocco, Tunisia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Chile (Howie 2002). Equally low were the levels of reading and mathematical skills of Grade 6 learners: the investigation by the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ 2009) reported that South Africa came ninth in both cases, behind countries such as Kenya, Tanzania and Seychelles,[4] despite South Africa's higher budget per learner (SAIRR 2007). Finally, learners' performances in the national Grade 12 examination in history in 2006 were, on average, 22% at the higher grade and 23% at the standard grade[5] (Pare and Webb 2007). The international scores were so poor that the former Minister of Education officially placed a moratorium on any further international comparisons until 2011, in the expectation that new strategies would by then have been put in place to remedy the situation (Pandor 2008).

Several factors have contributed to this situation, of course. One of them is the pre-1994 Bantu education system. As part of the realities of apartheid, the education of black learners was characterised by inadequate funding, ineffective teacher training, poor facilities, over-crowded classes, un-imaginative learning materials in the Bantu languages,[6] and so forth (see, for example, Hartshorne 1987, Kallaway 2002 and Carpentier 2005). Since 1994, serious attempts have been made to redress the situation, but the impact of the apartheid legacy is still being felt, particularly in the case of black and coloured learners from under-privileged backgrounds. Post-1994 developments themselves also constitute a factor underlying South Africa's poor educational performance. One such development is the large-scale migration of people to urban areas, leading to a demand for educational provision – especially in informal settlements and townships – that stretches capacity to the limit. Linked with this is the restricted capacity of teachers, especially in poorer areas.

Language is also an important causal factor: the strong preference for English as medium of instruction (MoI) by black learners for whom English is a second (and often even a third)[7] language, and who in a majority of cases do not have the required academic proficiency in English, plays a major part in learners' poor performance. Similarly, the insignificant use of learners' primary[8] languages (the Bantu languages) for study purposes is a serious contributing factor.

It is, of course, difficult to determine the effect of each of the various contributing factors on black learners' poor performance separately: each factor clearly interacts with the others, mutually increasing each others' effect. So, for example, overcrowded classes, poorly trained teachers, the lack of the necessary educational facilities and the complex mix of primary languages per classroom must each have a direct impact on the MoI issue. Given this, we nevertheless wish to focus on the role of the Bantu languages as MoI in South Africa and, briefly, also as subjects of study. We do this in the context of the country's language-in-education policy and with reference to schools in which learners are mostly black, taking note of the linguistic and socio-economic realities in these schools.[9]

A brief overview of education for black learners

In order to highlight the complexities of the language-in-education issue in South Africa, a brief overview of three important contextual dimensions is provided in the following sections.

Demography

South Africa has 12.5 million learners (83% of whom are black), and around 26,000 public schools of which 6000 are high schools (Grades 8–12, generally ages 14–18); with 72% having a *de facto* uni-racial learner population in 1997, though this percentage varied according to province, e.g., 92% in the Eastern Cape, 75% in North West, 54% in the Western Cape and 52% in Gauteng (Department of Education 2008).

Four types of schools

Leaving aside private schools, we distinguish four categories of schools on the basis of their social and racial character, particularly with reference to the language-in-education perspective.

Rural schools

These are schools attended by black learners which in the past were controlled by the former Department of Education and Training (generally known as DET schools) and by education departments in the so-called Bantustans (also called 'independent or self-governing homelands'). Today, the learners in these schools typically have very little knowledge of English, partly because they very seldom experience meaningful interaction with English speakers.[10] The teachers at these schools are also said to have limited proficiency in English. These schools, which include farm schools, have very little funding available, and thus also have extremely poor educational facilities.

Township schools

Township schools were also formerly DET schools or schools controlled by the education departments in the Bantustans. Nowadays, both the learners and the teachers in these schools potentially have more exposure to English than those in the rural areas, but their English language proficiency is still generally not adequate for study purposes, as will be shown below. These schools also have very limited budgets and poor facilities.

Ex-model C schools

In 1992, during the democratic transition, legislation was passed that offered the communities of the formerly white schools a choice of four models of schooling (see MacKenzie (1993) for details), based on different funding and management arrangements. One of these was the so-called 'model C' school. Under this model, schools were to be provided with state funding for 75% of their expenses and expected

to raise the remaining 25% through levying school fees or requesting donations, managed by the school governing bodies. They were also allowed to admit Asian, coloured and black learners. Because the model C schools became largely predominant, with 95% of the white schools conforming to this model (van Rooyen and Rossouw 2007, 24), these schools are still often referred to as 'ex-model C schools', even though the education system was restructured and formally unified after 1994.

The initial proportion of state and parents' funding in the ex-model C schools was rescinded, and the fees levied are now decided freely by each school governing body. The amount obviously depends on the socio-economic level of the communities for which the schools cater. Schools in lower socio-economic communities levy lower fees, and those in more affluent communities levy higher fees. The extent of school fees levied naturally (co-)determines the facilities provided by schools for their learners – especially in terms of the maintenance of existing infrastructure (libraries, laboratories, sports grounds), and also enables these schools to appoint additional teachers, allowing for a lower teacher–learner ratio (Pampallis 2008). The admission of black learners to these schools initially led to them becoming multiracial. Today, schematically, two polar types of ex-model C schools can be distinguished on the basis of their resources and demography: what we will call lower ex-model C schools, and upper ex-model C schools.

Lower ex-model C schools

In the lower ex-model C schools, the fees levied today range from about R3000 per annum for primary schools to R4000 for secondary schools.[11] Many parents of learners in these schools are, however, reported as not paying the fees, which means that these schools are reliant on state funding, and thus have a very small budget.[12] The facilities available at these schools are generally limited and over-stretched. As urbanisation and intra-urban migration have occurred, black learners have enrolled in growing numbers in these schools. Many white and Asian parents have either moved away from these school areas or have chosen to enrol their children elsewhere. Many of these schools have thus become almost or entirely black in terms of learner population, and thus can no longer be considered truly multiracial schools. The teachers, however, are still mostly white or Indian, and seldom have any knowledge of the languages spoken by their black pupils as home or primary languages.

Upper ex-model C schools

The upper ex-model C schools levy fees ranging from about R8000 a year for primary schools to R12000 or more for secondary schools and are accessible to the children of affluent parents. With higher fees, they are able to provide extensive facilities for learners, including additional teachers. They have become multiracial, with significant numbers of black, coloured and Indian learners, in addition to white learners.

The socio-educational environments of schools

The socio-educational environments of schools for black learners differ greatly. In the worst cases, particularly in the former DET and 'homeland' schools, viz. in

township and rural areas, schools are affected by factors such as teacher absenteeism, poor teacher–learner ratio, poor resources (libraries, electricity, water), dysfunctional and disrupted homes (with learners raised by single mothers with poorly paid jobs or no jobs at all, or even lack of parental care or support where a learner can be a family head) and violence at home and at school. Furthermore, in 2005, 101 schools without the necessary buildings and classes were taught 'under trees' in KwaZulu/Natal; in Limpopo this happened in 74 schools, according to the Minister of Education.[13] (See Kallaway (2002) for an earlier comprehensive account.)

The MoI choices in South African schools

As has been mentioned, English is by far the preferred MoI in South Africa (for the Africa-wide scenario, see Alidou et al. (2006)). The preference for English is borne out by the statistics provided by the Minister of Education (Tables 1 and 2 below).[14]

The strong preference for English is clear from Table 1: 67% of the schools in the Eastern Cape use English as MoI, 77% in the Limpopo Province, and 74% in Gauteng. The same situation is clear from the statistics in Table 2, with the percentages of black learners who selected English as MoI provided in the last column.

The history of the MoI policy and practice in black schools

The Bantu languages were first used as MoI in schools established and run by missionaries in the nineteenth century. From 1954, through the Bantu Education Act, education facilities were segregated; black learners had *per force* to attend schools where the use of African languages as MoI was made compulsory in the primary band. Given that Bantu education was an integral part of apartheid and that its schools provided education of poor quality, the use of Bantu languages in education was stigmatised. In secondary schools, the Bantu languages were taught as subjects, and the MoI was either English or Afrikaans (or both). The association of language with politics was further entrenched when the National Party government attempted to impose the equal use of Afrikaans and English as MoI in secondary schools across the country, which contributed to the 1976 Soweto protests. Today, the use of Bantu languages as MoI is still associated with poor education. (See Lafon (2008) for a development of this point.)

Table 1. Number of single- and parallel-medium schools, by primary language offered as the medium of instruction, in selected provinces, in 2004.

Province	Afr	Eng	Zulu	Xhosa	Pedi	Sotho	Vend	Tsonga	Total	% English
Eastern Cape	323	3993		1588		34			5939	67
Western Cape	947	568		39					1554	37
Limpopo		69	3243		481		184	169	4185	77
KwaZulu/Natal		33	3659	1956	26				5676	64
Northern Cape	252	46		7					316	15
Gauteng	329	1579	98	11	39	48	2	10	2135	74

Table 2. Relationship between home languages of learners and their selection of medium of instruction (MoI; home language and English), for selected languages in selected provinces.

Province	Learners' home language	n	%	Selected as MoI	% of learners who selected English as MoI
Eastern Cape	English	114,524	5.7	1,400,003	70
	Xhosa	1,889,712		647,432	
	Total	2,004,236			
Gauteng	Afrikaans	233,259		269,894	
	English	187,002	13.8	1,182,270	87.25
	Zulu	368,481		90,521	
	Pedi	161,991		38,877	
	Sesotho	254,679		45,954	
	Tswana	149,541		19,274	
	Total	1,354,953			
KwaZulu/Natal	English	229,098	8.9	1,935,648	75
	Zulu	2,351,714		723,369	
	Total	2,580,812			
Limpopo	English	8,998	0.5	1,388,106	79.6
	Pedi	992,466		264,425	
	Venda	313,664		83,468	
	Tsonga	429,525		118,617	
	Total	1,744,653			
Western Cape	Afrikaans	523,733		504,761	52
	English	202,265	20.9	410,217	42
	Xhosa	241,976		62,033	6
	Total	967,974			
Totals		8,652,628		9,184,869	

The post-1994 language-in-education policy (accepted in 1997) stipulates that learners have the right to learn and be taught in any one of the 11 national official languages of the country (which include the Bantu languages Ndebele, Swazi, Zulu, Xhosa, Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho, Tswana, Tsonga and Venda, as well as Afrikaans and English). Schools are expected to meet learners' preferences as far as possible. In practice, however, the Bantu languages may officially only be used as MoI up to Grade 3.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of schools beyond the foundation phase have officially opted for English as MoI. In black schools, however, this policy is often not fully implemented in practice. For example, in only one of the 38 lessons observed in the LingbeT project[15] (a lesson in physical science) was English, the official MoI used throughout the lesson. Typically, the following practices are found. Firstly, learners' primary languages may be used. In one of the schools in the project, a lesson in economic management science was taught wholly in Tsonga. This also seems to be the case in other regions. Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir (2003), for example, reported that teachers in rural schools in the Eastern Cape used Xhosa for teaching in Grades 5–7. Secondly, code-switching is quite common, a practice which is now condoned by the education authorities in the interests of learners' understanding and effective communication in class. Thirdly, urban vernaculars (code-mixed varieties) are increasingly used. Though these practices may facilitate understanding as well as

classroom interaction, they have other negative consequences, as will be discussed further later. The main reason for resorting to these practices is obviously that the English language proficiency of learners and teachers is often not adequate.

Despite the realities of the above practices, however, learners are still officially assessed only in English. Thus, a striking feature of the South African education system is that whilst the majority of white, coloured and Indian learners are taught, learn and are assessed in their home language (Afrikaans or English), this is not the case for a large section of the black school population, who, from Grade 4 onwards at least, have to learn and demonstrate their understanding, knowledge and skills through a language which is, at best, an L2 or even an L3. This is quite obviously unfair (for further discussion, see Webb 2002, 2004; Webb, Lepota and Ramagoshi 2004; Lafon 2008).

Language problems in black schools

The inadequacy of learners' English language proficiency for educational purposes

As mentioned earlier, English is the major (official) MoI in South African schools for black learners, particularly from Grade 4 upwards. There may be a small number of exceptions, where black learners opt for Afrikaans as MoI. In urban schools, particularly in the so-called upper ex-model C schools, this language choice is probably not educationally problematic (though it may be so socio-culturally) since many of the black learners in these schools have reasonably adequate English language proficiency. However, in lower ex-model C schools, township schools, and particularly rural or 'homeland' schools, the use of English as MoI poses a serious obstacle to both learning and learners' demonstration of their understanding, knowledge and subject skills. The fact is that black rural and township learners generally have an inadequate proficiency in English (Webb 2002; Williams 1993a, 1993b, 1996)[16] and this, as Abedi (2001, 246) demonstrates empirically, generally has a greater impact on learner performance than family income and parent education.

The English language proficiency of English second/third language learners in South Africa can, of course, be extensively discussed, with reference to their limited grammatical, textual, functional and sociolinguistic competence. However, in this contribution we want to mention just two aspects.

Firstly, the inadequate vocabulary of learners. As Macdonald (1990, 39, 48) demonstrated in her report on the Threshold project, commissioned to analyse the cause of the extensive DET school failure in the 1980s,[17] black learners had not acquired a sufficient range of vocabulary to be able to use English effectively as an MoI after three years of learning English as a second language. Today, in the further education and training phase (Grades 10–12), that is, after English has been 'used' as MoI for seven years, the problem is still acute, with learners having difficulties with academic words such as *coincide, complex, excess, influence, sequence, accumulation, abundance* and *devise* (Pare and Webb 2007, 17).

A second problematic issue is the over-estimation by black learners of their English language proficiency. An illustration of this is provided by responses to a questionnaire on English language proficiency, which formed part of the Le3o project[18] in a Tshwane college for Further Education and Training (FET), administered to 266 respondents (FET level equivalent to Grade 10): 90.7% of

these respondents indicated that they could write English very well or well; 92% claimed they spoke English very well or well; 99.8% that they could read English very well or well; and 91% that they could understand English very well or well. These responses were compared with their actual writing performance (reporting on an accident at school). The following examples come from their essays:

> There was so many people try to get their class.
>
> With English we could all be able to agree with the language.
>
> I don't know it meaning that I can hear you but I can reply you the way you want me to 'cause I have lack of commicating [*sic*] in English.
>
> I will happy with the manager her [hear] us.
>
> This days the bosses at work are whites and you cannot talk with them on your own mother tongue. (Webb 2005b)

The de facto English-only MoI in South Africa is not only discriminatory and unfair, the subordination of learners' first language (L1) has profound and negative educational consequences. The fact that L1 skills remain un(der)developed affects learners' cognitive development; classroom interaction – so essential educationally – is radically limited; the general acquisition of knowledge and skills is restricted; the resources learners bring to school (experiences, views, beliefs, but also linguistic resources) are ignored and not utilised; and meaningful co-operation between the school and the parents is constrained. Referring to the limited English of Latinos in the USA, García and Menken (2006, 172) argue that 'the harsh English-only language policy in school creates linguistic discontinuities between home and school, between children and parents, and between modes of language use in individual children (they can, for instance, speak their primary language, but can't read or write it)'. And Gutiérrez et al. (2002) describe the effect of the English-only policy and practice particularly on poor children in California as 'devastating'. The South African learners most affected by the use of a non-primary language as MoI are the same learners who were disadvantaged under the former regime. If these students are not appropriately accommodated for the impact of the language factor, they will remain poor achievers and continue to be disadvantaged.

The enormous power of English, and its economic, social and political value – its high market value for the individual, the learner, the society and the nation – make it unlikely that arguments in support of L1 instruction, the value of L1 proficiency development, the value of fully-fledged multilingualism and the indisputable benefits of biliteracy will have any significant impact on parents' decisions about opting for English as MoI. The consequences of the use of English when it is a second/third language as MoI are so enormous, especially in the long term, that decision-makers and opinion-formers, such as the national and provincial departments of education, face a serious social and educational responsibility.

Objective reasons for the non-use of Bantu languages in education

As in the case of the English language proficiency of black English second/third language learners, the very limited use of Bantu languages in education can also be discussed in extensive terms. We will, however, restrict our observations to a few central matters.

The Bantu languages have not been adequately standardised

The Bantu languages have not yet been developed into fully-fledged standard languages. During the apartheid regime, the government transformed the existing language bodies which dealt with the Nguni languages and the Sotho languages respectively, into separate boards for each language as part of implementing the policy of apartheid. This gave rise to four bodies within the Nguni group and three within the Sotho/Tswana group. One of the tasks of these boards was the standardisation of the respective languages. After 1994, these boards were dissolved and replaced by the National Language Bodies (NLBs), which function under the supervision of the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). Their tasks include, of course, the standardisation of spelling, orthography and terminology. Despite their work in this area, however, the standardised varieties have not been widely accepted, are not effectively known by their L1 speakers and are therefore not used in formal contexts, such as school classrooms. According to observations by researchers in the LingbeT project, the only lesson in which the standard language was used to some degree was in the teaching of Northern Sotho as L1. Status, prestige, acquisition and usage development thus still need to take place. (See later, as well as Webb 2005a, 2009.)

The Bantu languages have not been adequately technologised

Despite the valuable work of the South African Department of Arts and Culture's National Language Service directorate and PanSALB, there are still major challenges in the development of technical terms in the Bantu languages. One of the most important of these is the dissemination of terms already normalised for use in school classrooms. Equally challenging is agreeing on new terms for scientific concepts. Moji (1998, 258), for example, illustrates the difficulty of finding appropriate terms in Southern Sotho, by remarking that Southern Sotho has only one word (*lebelo*) for the concepts 'speed', 'velocity' and 'acceleration', and only one word (*mantla*) for the concepts 'energy', 'force', 'power' and 'momentum'. Ntake and Pare (2001), Pare (2008) and Taljard (2002, 2008) provide further discussion of the problem of technologising the Bantu languages.

The increasing use of urban vernaculars

The inadequate development of the Bantu languages as fully-fledged standard languages means, of course, that when L1s are used in classrooms, it is not the standard varieties that are used, but vernaculars. In the urban schools of Gauteng, for example, the urban vernaculars (code-mixed varieties) used are Pretoria Sotho, Tsotsitaal, Gauteng Zulu and/or Iscamtho (Schuring 1985; Ntshangase 1995; Calteux 1996; Lafon 2005; Cook 2008).

Pretoria Sotho is based on Sekgatla, a Tswana dialect, and is made up of elements from Northern Sotho, the Nguni languages, Afrikaans and English. It is mostly spoken around Pretoria and surrounding areas, and the townships or villages around Brits. It is gradually gaining momentum in areas such as Rustenburg, as shown by Cook (1999) with reference to Street Setswana in Rustenburg.

Gauteng Zulu is the variety which has spread among Zulus established for generations in the southern part of Gauteng (the main Johannesburg townships, in

particular Soweto and Alexandra). It has become the dominant language in this area, and has to some extent been adopted as a lingua franca even by non-Zulu speakers. It contains lexical and syntactic features from the other Nguni languages, the Sotho languages, Tsonga, English and Afrikaans.

Tsotsitaal and Iscamtho are used in the townships around Pretoria and Johannesburg respectively, with Tsotsitaal being Afrikaans-based, and Iscamtho being based more on Zulu. Initially they functioned as powerful markers of the identity of the different gangs in the areas and thus became associated with gangsters, 'tsotsis' (originally meaning young black gangster) and so-called 'cheap life'. They were therefore not deemed decent for girls or families to use (Ntshangase 1995, 22). However, through the influence of youth culture, notably music, this stigma is disappearing and both Tsotsitaal and Iscamtho are no longer restricted to thugs. They are varieties in which students, learners and teachers communicate every day. They are continually changing and incorporating new words, while Pretoria Sotho seems to be static. This may mean that the urban varieties may be unable to withstand the pressure from the street varieties, and that the latter will be used more frequently in classrooms in township schools.

As things stand, we argue for an openness towards change in the standard varieties, particularly for a partial incorporation of their respective urban varieties, which would then be strengthened *vis-à-vis* the street varieties (Lafon 2005). At the moment, code-switching in schools should be tolerated, and even encouraged until there is more acceptance of the standardised variety. When the standardised varieties that we advocate have become more accepted and the distance between the spoken variety and the standard variety has decreased, we contend that from an educational and a sociolinguistic point of view, the use of urban vernaculars as well as code switching in schools should be discouraged for at least two reasons. Firstly, these practices act as obstacles to the acquisition and development of the standard varieties of the Bantu languages and thus complicate the promotion of the Bantu languages. Secondly, their use will impact negatively on the development of learners' skills in the standard variety of their L1s, which will affect their academic performance (see later, as well as Malimabe 1995). This practice, given that urban vernaculars and code-switching are essentially oral practices (but can appear in informal written use), will also have a negative effect on learners' preparation for their future professional lives, where they will need skills in formal and, especially, written language.

Underdeveloped literacy in L1s

It is generally reported that black learners are not adequately proficient in their first or primary languages. This is apparent from respondents' own ratings of their L1 proficiency levels in the Le3o research project questionnaire mentioned above (see Table 3 below), even though the respondents came from schools where, beyond Foundation Phase, their home languages were taught as subjects.

Although it is possible that the respondents were exaggerating their lack of proficiency in their home languages in order to make some sort of statement (in the same vein as their over-estimation of their English language proficiency, mentioned earlier), their responses are nevertheless disturbing. This is particularly so in the case of the category 'Not well known/Not known'. In the case of Northern Sotho, for example, 60.8% report not being adequately proficient in reading it, and 70% not

Table 3. Subjective evaluation of first-language proficiency (%).

First language	Speak		Read		Write		Understand	
	VW/W	NW/N	VW	NW/N	VW/W	NW/N	VW/W	NW/N
N. Sotho	35	41.7	22.1	60.8	16.6	70	42.3	30.4
Setswana	46.2	31.8	44.5	43.6	41	52	59.9	27.7
Tsonga	25	74.8	11.2	83.8	8.33	88.3	22.9	70.5
Venda	20.2	78.2	18.6	79.3	17	81.8	20.6	77.4
Zulu	36.5	42.1	27.3	58	22	67.6	43.9	31.7

Notes: VW/W, very well or well; NW/N, not well or not at all; source: Webb (2005b).

Table 4. Opinions of respondents asked to indicate whether they agree (Strongly Agree/ Agree combined) or disagree (Disagree/Strongly Disagree combined) with the following statements.

Statement	Agree (%)
The study of Bantu languages at school is useful	52
An African language should replace English as the language of teaching	25
The Bantu languages can't really be used for studying technical subjects	58
Bantu languages are only appropriate for use in talking with friends and family	59

Source: Webb (2005b).

being adequately proficient in writing it. It may be that participants understood the question to refer to 'standard Northern Sotho' (often called 'deep Sotho') rather than their own variety, and hence the need for a concomitant revision of the standard varieties. But even so, this is indicative of a serious literacy problem. Pretorius (2008) provides strong evidence of black learners' literacy problems in their primary languages, while Barkhuizen (2001, 9) reports that the negative perceptions among Eastern and Western Cape Xhosa-speaking learners of the Xhosa they study at school are linked to the fact that they study 'deep Xhosa', which differs from the language they speak with their friends. Barkhuizen also links this negativity with the focus of the Xhosa curriculum on learning grammar and phonetics (Barkhuizen 2001, 10). Quite clearly, the teaching of the Bantu languages at primary and secondary school level needs considerable attention, as we discuss below.

Negative attitudes to the Bantu languages

Research also confirms that the social meaning of the Bantu languages is globally negative in the communities where they are used as primary languages. Respondents clearly do not regard these languages as instruments for communication in high-function formal contexts (such as teaching, government announcements and parliamentary debates), as is evidenced in the following responses in the Le3o project (see Table 4 above).

In addition, only 41% of these respondents watched television often or very often in Bantu languages,[19] as compared with almost 90% who report watching English language programmes; 39.8% listened to the radio in these languages, against 80% who listened in English; and more than 40% had no desire to read books, newspapers or magazines in their first languages. There are also indications of a shift

away from first languages towards English in everyday usage. Asked what language they use most often with different categories of people, 8.15% stated that they used English most often with their parents; 15.5% with relatives; 19.1% with brothers and sisters; and 36.6% with friends.

It is ironic that the Bantu languages in South Africa are seen in socio-political terms as minority languages despite their numerical strength. They have very little prestige, have a very low market value, and are regarded as being used by low-status people in low-function contexts.[20] A telling example is the headteacher, interviewed in the LingbeT research project, who commented that some learners come to school 'with no language at all', meaning, of course, no proficiency in English, but implying that learners' proficiency in an African language is of no use at all. Although Bantu languages retain socio-cultural value, for example as markers of identity (see Rudwick (2004) in the case of Zulu), their role and function in the lives of black learners have become a very serious problem, which is bound to raise questions of identity both at the individual and the group level.

Language as an object of study

Cognitive, affective and social development is, as we know, mediated (*inter alia*) through language, from which it follows that the higher the development of learners' linguistic skills, the higher their ability to acquire, process and use information. The linguistic skills required for educational development are, furthermore, high-level skills, involving command not just of a wide vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, but also textual knowledge (e.g., the ability to understand and produce academic texts), functional knowledge (e.g., the ability to compare and explain phenomena, to define and to reason at abstract levels), and sociolinguistic knowledge (e.g., the appropriate way of referring to matters in formal contexts). In addition, the ability to manage information (integrating new knowledge into existing knowledge bases, selecting information for problem-solving, and so forth) requires advanced cognitive language skills, which Cummins (2000) refers to as CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). Cognitive language skills are developed in all subject areas, of course, but they should also, crucially, be developed in the course of L1 study.

Preliminary observation in the LingbeT project, however, suggests that the development of black learners' L1 skills is not being handled adequately in the study of these languages as subjects. The reasons for this may have to do with the low value of the Bantu languages, uninteresting and irrelevant syllabuses, study material and inappropriate didactic methods, as well as the lack of appealing texts (e.g., cartoons, magazines, and so forth). Research must clearly be undertaken on the role of all these factors in the development of high-level L1 skills in the South African context. In addition, the promotion of a general reading culture in the L1 needs serious attention.

Research and development challenges regarding the role of Bantu languages in black schools

There are, of course, many research and development challenges regarding the use of the Bantu languages as MoI, such as: their development as languages appropriate for high-function formal contexts; the development of proficiency in the standard

varieties of these languages and in their usage; the development and effective dissemination of standardised technical terminology in content subjects; the production of school textbooks and works of literature that can be used in L1 study; the training of teachers in the use of the Bantu languages as MoI; and the development of first-language teachers' use of effective didactic methods. In this section, we focus on four issues which we believe are fundamental.

The development of appropriate MoI policies and practices

Working within the framework of the different MoI models in multilingual communities (viz. single medium schools, parallel medium schools, dual medium schools and mother-tongue-based bilingual education (Heugh 1997; Alexander 2003)) and recognising the sociolinguistic character of the different schools, appropriate MoI policies and practices need to be developed for the four different types of school discussed previously (rural, township, lower and upper ex-model C schools). The fact is that schools in South Africa differ considerably in their educational linguistic needs: some are largely monolingual, others complexly multilingual; some are located in areas where English is practically a foreign language, whilst others are in areas where learners are exposed to English on a daily basis. Obviously, the MoI policies and practices need to fit the sociolinguistic character of the particular schools and their localities.

Exact information on the sociolinguistic character of schools in different regions is not available, but it is likely that school populations in most of the rural school districts of the country may be relatively cohesive linguistically. In such cases, the challenges of developing and implementing locally appropriate multilingual school language policies may be less complicated (though still serious). In urban areas, however, particularly in Gauteng province, schools are generally deeply and complexly multilingual, housing a good number of the 11 official languages (as well, more often than not, as other languages, brought in by recent immigrants from outside). Linking schools' language-in-education policies meaningfully to their sociolinguistic characters in such cases is an extremely difficult challenge, and questions such as the following need to be dealt with: if Bantu languages are to be used as MoI in Gauteng's urban schools, how should the distribution of languages among schools be handled? Should schools be defined on linguistic grounds? What languages should be offered as subjects of study and at what levels in which schools?[21]

An additional issue is that strategies and measures need to be put in place for the monitoring and revision of schools' language-in-education policies. This dimension of language policy implementation is often neglected. Institutions seem to regard the development of a language policy as a sufficient response to its language political problems, a seriously short-sighted approach, as argued by Webb (2006) with reference to universities in South Africa.

The distribution of information regarding the MoI issue to decision-making institutions

The Department of Education Language-in-Education policy of 1997 is generally regarded in a very positive light, given that it is an appropriate expression of the principles underlying the country's constitution, in particular the promotion of equality and human rights (including citizens' right to make their own decisions) and

the promotion of multilingualism (diversity). All learners (or their guardians) have a right to choose any of the 11 languages as medium of instruction and to study this language as a subject from Grade 3 onwards (in addition to the study of the MoI). Except for stipulations such as: 'only official languages may be used for instruction; language may not be used as a barrier to admission; governing bodies must stipulate how their schools will promote multilingualism'; and 'failing a language will result in failing a grade [the year's study]', the policy contains no compulsory stipulations; in particular, it does not identify languages (Department of Education 1997). In this sense, it is by nature not 'coercive', and is not an instrument of 'top-down' policy implementation. As is generally known in language planning studies, top-down approaches can be ineffective or counter-productive, as was clearly demonstrated by the 1976 protests by Sowetan learners, mentioned previously. Language planning has been found to be effective only if it has the support of the communities involved and is driven by leaders in these communities (Webb 2009). One of the central contentions of this article is that the national language-in-education policy, though adequate in theory, is currently being implemented in a way which has serious negative consequences for South Africa, as discussed in our introduction. In our view, it needs to be handled in a well-organised 'bottom-up' manner, which includes obtaining the support of the communities of teachers, parents and learners.

One way of obtaining the support of these communities is by ensuring that they are effectively informed about the central issues involved in selecting a medium of instruction, and have, firstly, a clear understanding of the advantages of mother-tongue instruction and the disadvantages of having to study in a language learners do not know adequately and, secondly, that they understand that the effective acquisition of English does not require its use as a medium of instruction as early as possible. Information such as this could be provided to these communities in the form of regional workshops, for example. Similarly, the pre-service training programmes of teachers need to develop understanding of the issues involved in the role of language in education; in particular, the need to promote the Bantu languages of South Africa, and the ways in which language needs can be addressed in different language-related models of education, such as mother-tongue-based bilingual education.

Promoting the Bantu languages

Taking note of the preconditions for language promotion and development, in particular the need to increase the economic and social value of the languages concerned, a programme for the development of the Bantu languages as fully-fledged standard languages needs to be developed.

In the educational context, such a programme could involve:

- Developing the linguistic capacity of Bantu languages (corpus development), including their capacity for technical communication (that is, their technical terminology and registers) and the development of the appropriate educational resources (e.g. user-friendly grammars and dictionaries);
- Developing their status into languages-of-education (status development), which means, inter alia, addressing the attitudes of parents, learners and school managements, as well as challenging the many myths around language-in-education, such as that English language proficiency is equivalent to being

educated; that English can only be acquired through full immersion, and that Bantu languages are inappropriate as educational media;

- Developing teachers' and learners' competence in the standard varieties (acquisition development), in particular as languages for academic purposes, or CALP (Cummins 2000). Included here would be the improvement of their study as first languages and the development of a culture of books and reading, of intellectual discussion and critical discourse, and of the ability to handle the media (including the electronic media) in responsible ways. Similarly, the acquisition of these languages as additional languages, i.e. by non-mother-tongue speakers, must be facilitated;
- Promoting the use of the Bantu languages (usage development) in all teaching, for example for classroom discussions, writing assignments and assessment in general;
- Promoting the social meaning of the Bantu languages (prestige development), for instance through their use in all high-function formal public contexts and through the production of fictional and non-fictional literature;[22]
- Making the study of a Bantu language compulsory for all learners up to Grade 12 (see, for instance, Granville et al. (1997) and Lafon (2008)).

In light of the fact that a large number of research and development projects directed at the promotion of the Bantu languages are being (and have been) undertaken in South Africa, it is clearly essential that researchers share information and co-operate with one another. This can be done through establishing and maintaining a website containing information on research and development projects throughout the country. The same arrangement could apply to projects elsewhere in Africa and beyond. Useful institutions in this regard are the Academy of African Languages (ACALAN) and the Association for the Development of African Languages in Education, Science and Technology (ADALEST). The Project for Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), located at the University of Cape Town, has been one of the most important centres regarding the use of the Bantu languages in education.[23]

Conclusion

In conclusion: language is sometimes regarded (and even said to be) a 'soft issue'. This is, of course, not the case. Language is fundamental to development, national integration and the establishment of pluralism. If this fact is not accepted by political and educational decision-makers as well as teacher, parent and learner communities, South Africa will not become a developed, meaningfully multilingual and nationally integrated country. Clearly, for the language-related educational problems to be resolved, the country has to undergo radical linguistic transformation.

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/

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