

Walking the tightrope between policy and practice: testing a national policy of language diversity in higher education language practices

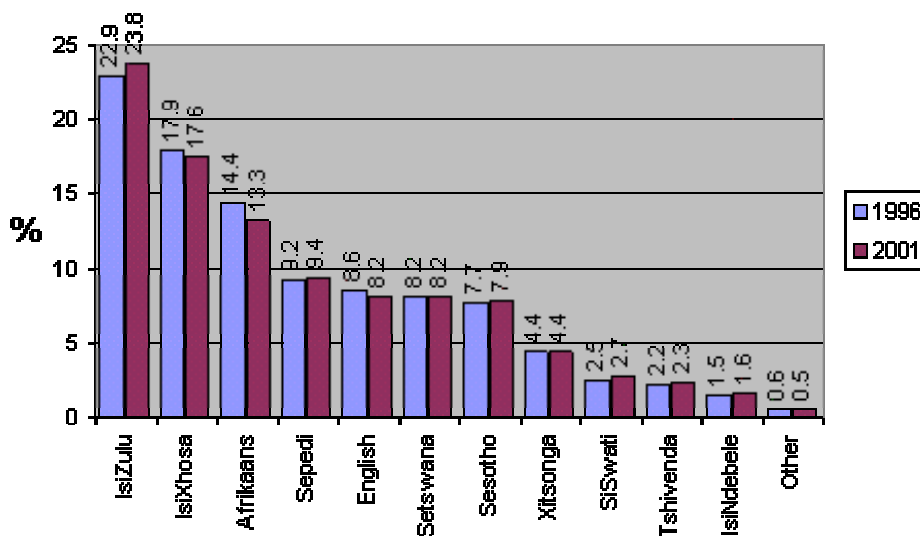
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Considering the decision in South Africa to accept 11 official languages and to encourage a particular model of language diversity, this paper will explore a linguistic domain, namely language in higher education, in which policy appears to be in conflict with practices that one would expect it to support. Attempts to address linguistic conflict in this domain by drawing on the national policy, seem to highlight covert aspects of the policy that contradict what is overtly given.

I shall focus on matters related to decisions on ‘language of learning’ and how this is managed, as a test for language policy. Particularly, I shall attend to considerations that have a bearing on *languages of learning* in higher education in South Africa. As a case study I shall focus on pertinent matters recently in issue at the University of Stellenbosch, which is the oldest Afrikaans university in the country and one that has explicitly accepted a language policy that undertakes to actively encourage and support the use of Afrikaans as a language in higher education, i.e. as a language used in relatively sophisticated academic reflection, in teaching, learning and research.

To give you an impression of the particular kind of language diversity we have in South Africa, I would like to show you two graphs that give a breakdown of the distribution of languages in the population.

1. Percentage of speakers per language in South Africa (1996 and 2001)



source: <http://www.cyberserv.co.za/users/~jako/lang/stats.htm>

2. Number of speakers with Afrikaans as First Language (1980 – 2002)

AFRIKAANS AS MOEDERTAAL		
	1980	2002
Wit mense	2 581 080	2 558 968
Bruin mense	2 274 680	2 982 409
Swart mense	70 000	213 603

source: R.Belcher. *Die Burger*, 13 July 2002. p. 13

Since the unification of various regions under British colonial rule in 1910, there were two official languages in the country, first Dutch and English, and later Afrikaans (1925 -) and English¹. Since the transformation captured in the constitution of 1994 there are 11 official languages: the most widely used indigenous languages have been given, at least in the legislation, equal status to English and Afrikaans.

Referring to Education, the Bill of Rights makes provision for the following:

“Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account—

- (a) equity;
- (b) practicability; and
- (c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.”

My paper will reflect on what Schiffman (1996) refers to as the ‘fit’ between language policy and polity considering the different ‘polities’ for which a national language policy and a university’s language policy need to provide. The question is how the aims of a national government are to be reconciled with the aims of a much smaller institutional division such as a university.

First I shall consider the linguistic landscape at South African universities and attend to the position of historically Afrikaans universities of which one is the University of Stellenbosch. I shall give an outline of which languages feature as languages of learning, and highlight certain policy considerations that underlie linguistic choices as they have been motivated recently.

Second I shall explain what I mean when I say that very often ‘policy is in conflict with practice’.

Third I shall consider how referring to overt and covert aspects of policy may be helpful in recognising

- (i) what the policy provides for but in practice does not support,
- (ii) how an understanding of the historic and social context may help explain such contradictory practices in the implementation of policy.

Finally, I shall consider

- * What happens when the polity represented in the national policy differs in significant ways from the polity represented in the higher education institution’s policy
- * How an institutional language policy that considers seriously the language rights afforded by the national policy, can secure the rights of a particular speech community that it historically represents, and at the same time honour the rights of other, historically excluded, speech communities.

1. The linguistic landscape at South African universities

The provisions for language in education was formalised in a government policy document 2000 as follows:

“Language/s of Learning and Teaching (LOLT):

Since language, as the fundamental instrument of learning and teaching, is at the heart of all education, learners should be strongly encouraged to use their primary languages as their main LOLT at all levels of schooling. In addition, all learners must have the opportunity to learn additional languages to high levels of proficiency.”

¹ Dutch rule in the country was through a trading company, the VOC, from 1652 to 1804; the larger part of the settled European population at the time continued to speak Dutch which gradually developed marked dialectal variation distinct from any standard form of Dutch. Since 1875 there was recognition among speakers that they actually had a new ‘African’ language – Afrikaans. In 1925 Dutch was officially abandoned in favour of Afrikaans as the second official language. English colonial rule officially lasted from 1804 to 1962 although the exact territory and the boundaries of the regions under British rule changed as certain historic events unfolded. In 1910 unification took place of the 4 provinces that eventually, in 1962, became the Republic of South Africa. Between 1962 and 1994 the official language dispensation remained one that recognised Afrikaans and English. All along the indigenous African languages were marginalised in virtually all public domains.

The position at universities does not meet this encouragement to use students' primary language. For the majority of South African universities (17 in all, though this is changing as there is a process of restructuring underway) the language of learning is English only.

No indigenous African language is used as a language-of learning at tertiary level. It has become a matter of much debate whether there is the need or the will to develop the indigenous African languages to become languages of learning in circumstances where English (a second language for the majority) gives wider access in the global context. This is an intense and interesting debate – but not one that I will directly present today.

In focus here, is the position of the only language-of-learning other than English in higher education, namely Afrikaans. Six of the established universities countrywide can be characterised as *historically* Afrikaans:

- * the University of Stellenbosch, and the University of the Western Cape in the south,
- * the University of the Free State in the central region, and
- * the three others up north, situated around the economic hub of the 'gold city', namely
 - the University of Pretoria,
 - Potchefstroom University, and
 - the Rand Afrikaans University.

Three of these institutions started out in the late 18- and early 19-hundreds, teaching in English, even if for a predominantly Dutch/Afrikaans community. Relatively soon, around the turn of the century, Dutch replaced English. After 1925, when Afrikaans replaced Dutch as the second official language, with increased public awareness of Afrikaans as an emerging language distinct from Dutch, Afrikaans was phased in as the language of learning.

The University of the Western Cape was established in 1960 by the government of the time to address its embarrassment at not allowing Afrikaans students of colour to register at the Afrikaans university of the region, the University of Stellenbosch. In the late 1980s with the intensification of the struggle against apartheid this university defied government policy in accepting any academically eligible students regardless of racial classification. This, along with various other social and political processes during the 1990s, resulted in the registration of very large numbers of Xhosa-speaking students whose preferred, and often only, language of learning is English. The shift towards English is of such dimensions that it is no longer justified to identify UWC as an Afrikaans university.

Since 1994, with the registration at formerly Afrikaans universities of more and more first language speakers of indigenous African languages, the position necessarily had to be reviewed. For most of these students English has been the language of learning for at least 8 of their 12 school years. Three of these universities, namely the University of the Free State, University of Pretoria and the Rand Afrikaans University, have formally set out policies that identify them as bilingual institutions that have as their medium of instruction both Afrikaans and English. In their language policy documents these universities first recognise that they are institutions operating within a multilingual, multicultural environment and then go on to stipulate how the various languages will be used in various contexts, either in parallel-medium (separate classes for the various language groups) or in dual-medium (use of two languages in one classroom) mode, unless the circumstances and composition of the student body justifies a selection of either one or the other of the two languages.

The Potchefstroom University has a very brief language policy document that simply states "The Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys is an Afrikaans university", and then sets out different settings in which English will in fact from time to time or systematically, be used.

The University of Stellenbosch introduces a slightly more elaborate language policy document with a statement of its core policy:

"The University of Stellenbosch is committed to the use and sustained development of Afrikaans as an academic language in a multilingual context. Language is used at the University in a manner that is directed towards engagement with knowledge in a diverse society."

In the introduction it goes on to state:

"the University makes a contribution to the development of Afrikaans as an academic language, but at the same time takes into consideration the multicultural and multilingual reality of South

Africa by, alongside the particular focus on Afrikaans, also taking English and isiXhosa into account.”

The policy mentions as one of its principles that it recognises and respects “ the core values enshrined within the South African Constitution”, as well as “national policy and the processes of policy formation.” Although Afrikaans is accepted as the ‘default language in undergraduate learning and instruction’, English is widely recognised and used, particularly at postgraduate level as well as in external communication. And in support of isiXhosa, the indigenous language most widely used in the area, it stipulates:

- Afrikaans, English and, where possible, isiXhosa are the University's languages of external communication.
- Provision is made for isiXhosa in some programmes with a view to professional communication.
- The University promotes isiXhosa as a developing academic language, amongst other ways, through its Language Centre

This policy has not been received with massive acclaim; a ‘language debate’ erupted not only between speakers of Afrikaans and speakers of other languages, but almost more intensely inside of the Afrikaans language community. The debate is not restricted to the region or to the community traditionally attached to this university. Some interpret the policy as providing subtle measures for stalling processes of diversification geared towards enrolling larger numbers of black students; others interpret it as providing scant protection for the continued use of Afrikaans as an academic language. Many who do all of their academic work in Afrikaans, refrain from taking part in the debate as they do not want to associate with the conservative sentiments of a number of vociferous campaigners for exclusive use of Afrikaans.

Certainly, there is some difficulty with the ‘fit’ between language policy and linguistic reality. In the following section I shall reflect on the nature of this awkward fit not only between policy and polity, but also between institutional language policy and national language policy.

2. Policy in conflict with practice

In considering how Afrikaans may or may not continue to be used in higher education, we are reflecting on the peculiar position of a language that is in fact a minority language which seems to be losing ground in domains where it formerly (before 1994) was well established. Even among first language speakers of Afrikaans the language apparently lacks full support for procedures that will contain or reverse its gradual demise. In the debate about minority language rights and the imperialism of English, many will speak out in defense of indigenous languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho or Tswana. However, in defense of Afrikaans there is a certain degree of hesitance when it comes to publicly championing for the rights of this language in all public domains. A fairly limited knowledge of the history of the past 50 years will of course offer some explanation for this: legitimate anger of communities severely repressed before 1994, was directed at former oppressors. In an interesting, though not unusual, metaphoric process where the language became symbolic of its speakers, and where the oppressive community was largely made up of “Afrikaners”, feelings of reproach and animosity were transferred to the language of the oppressors as well. One has to accept the psychological reality of the processes by which experiences of torment and suffering often translate into resentment and antagonism directed at cultural goods associated with those responsible for the torment. Currently much of the animosity comes also from communities who in the turbulent years before 1994 were perhaps less prosecuted than they were marginalised and their protest silenced.

Interestingly and admirably, the new SA constitution and particularly the official language policy, does not nurture such transfer of negative sentiments and so at least in principle, *de jure*, it provides equally for every SA language with a significant enough number of speakers to have justified awarding it official status. It does not distinguish between languages on the basis of the histories or their respective communities of speakers. A citation from the national language policy document of November 2000 underscores this position. The document specifies that one of the strategic goals of government is

“to facilitate individual empowerment and national development by promoting the equitable use of the official languages and thus ensuring that all South Africans have the freedom to exercise their language rights by using the official language/s of their choice in a range of contexts. This applies in particular to equality of access to government services and programmes, and to knowledge and information.”

Between policy and practice however, there often lies a chasm.

Perceptions and attitudes are not as easily changed as policy documents; community practices are slower in catching up with new convictions or new regulations than one would hope for.

The language policy of the University of Stellenbosch is an institutional policy that is grounded in the national language policy – rather opportunistically, some would say. Nevertheless, it is written: there are overt, explicit provisions and undertakings, the execution of which can be measured. In practice the policy has difficulties in establishing its *bona fides* outside of the more established university community.

Schiffmann (1996:4) has noted that it does not make good sense “to consider something to *be* policy simply because it is written”. One needs to consider practices that are telling of the particular aspects of policy that in fact are operative. How much of the written policy is being translated into practice? Such a question is directed as much at the national policy as at the institutional policy of the university.

The particular kind of conflict we find between language policy and language-of-learning practice in the higher education setting, thus becomes apparent when an institutional language policy that draws on the provisions of the national policy, runs into difficulties. On the one hand there appears to be a gap between what national policy states and what it in fact provides for; on the other hand there appears to be a gap between what the university’s language policy states and what its intentions are believed to be. Thus there appears to be a credibility gap: is government serious when it encourages and offers protection to ALL the official languages, and is the university serious when it encourages and offers protection to the first language of the community historically attached to the institution, as well as encouraging development of English and even Xhosa ‘where practicable’?

3. Overt and covert aspects of policy

Schiffmann (1996) considers various criteria that he regards to be useful in arriving at an insightful typology of language policies. He introduces a distinction between *overt* and *covert* policy in a manner similar to Becker and Geer’s (1960) distinction between *manifest* and *latent* culture².

Following the distinctive features he suggests, we would typify the language policies of both the South African state and those of the historically Afrikaans universities as ones that have originated “in order to deal with the multilingualism of the citizenry.” (p.3)

Schiffman (p.5) also suggests that in seeking explanations for why certain polities have the kinds of language policies they have, “we must look more deeply into their linguistic histories”, in particular he refers to the importance of those aspects of language that he refers to as ‘linguistic culture’.

Language policy, Schiffmann (p.5) finds, is ultimately grounded in that “set of behaviours, assumptions, cultural forms, prejudices, folk belief systems, attitudes, stereotypes, ways of thinking about language, and religio-historical circumstances associated with a particular language. Part of the “linguistic culture” of a speech community would be the beliefs (one might even use the term myths) that it has about language in general, as well as the beliefs it has about its own language in particular. Beliefs a community has about its own language are found to be the ones that give rise to the community’s attitudes towards other languages. Such “linguistic culture” forms part of the social conditions that affect the maintenance and transmission of a language.

Schiffmann cites various language policies such as the one in 19th century Russia where (p.6) the *de jure* policy provided for only one language while in actuality deviations occurred, and a later position in Poland where teachers paid lip-service to Russian, even paraded their best students before school inspectors, but covertly taught in Polish. He points to a general phenomenon where language policy may provide a false front when it declares that only one language may be used, but conceals another reality where in fact more languages are being used.

² He also refers to Whorf’s distinction between overt and covert grammatical categories and to Labov’s distinction between overt and covert prestige of certain dialects.

Another general fallacy that Schiffmann (p.13) points out, is the belief that if a community ('the polity of the state') is bi- or multilingual, then people who form part of the citizenry are also bi-lingual or multilingual (cf. Belgium, Switzerland, India) In fact, often multilingual polities are made up of many monolinguals and few bilinguals; many who are multilingual are not "balanced bi- or multilinguals", i.e. they would have limited repertoires in their second or third languages.

Considering all the above, it seems then that language policy can very often be dichotomized into, on the one hand, overt policy which is "explicit, formalised, de jure, codified and manifest and, on the other hand, covert policy which is "implicit, informal, unstated, de facto, grass-roots and latent). Many researchers take what is overtly given in policy at face value, and ignore what actually happens on the ground ... at the grass-roots level. Referring to such overt policy and covert aspects in the fit between state policy and practice, and between institutional policy and practice may be helpful in understanding why policies that seem laudable are not met with much applause, and may also assist in creating support for closing the gap between what is legislated and what is actually provided for.

In the presence of a particularly enlightened national language policy that expresses concern for underrepresented languages and pledges support for their maintenance and development, one could ask (i) what is being done to develop the indigenous African languages as languages of learning and (ii) why is so little national support available for the maintenance of the one language other than English that has developed as a language of learning even in higher education? Simply due to time constraints I will not respond to the first of the two questions. Between what the policy offers overtly and what is provided for in reality there is indeed a gap, which would be a very curious circumstance if one did not consider the circumstances that give rise to the particular policy and the related practices. Details of the linguistic history of the Afrikaans speaking community during the past century give some insight into the reluctance of many to implement a policy that would strengthen Afrikaans in a domain where it appears to be under pressure.

In a climate where sentiments in favour of conservation reign, there is heightened awareness that it is better to protect before decline becomes irreversible, that one should not wait till younger generations no longer acquire the language of their parents and grandparents. However, if a language community has become vilified due to a history of power abuse, how does one save the language that has a longer life than the particular history of abuse and oppression? Afrikaans has a history that goes back to way before the policy of apartheid, it is spoken currently – even as a first language – by some 600 to 700 000 people more than the white Afrikaners. Giliomee (2003) refers to the identity the language gave to a deeply wounded community at the beginning of the 20th century, to the challenge it put to English colonial rule by developing and establishing a national literature and a national school of history, to the role it played in Afrikaner economic development as early as the 1940s.

The question then is whether in the new dispensation there is true political will to maintain Afrikaans as an official language equal to the other 10 and thus also as a language of learning in higher education. And related to this is the question of how an institutional language policy will materialise when it overtly states its intent to provide sustained development of Afrikaans as an academic language, even while it acknowledges the diversity of the multilingual community in which it is situated. The questions to me appear to be ones of credibility. Who is to be trusted? Are there covert aspects to the policies that will fuel doubt and lack of faith in what the policies overtly profess?

4. Conclusion: the possibility of redeeming credibility

To finalise, I shall turn to the two questions I specifically set out to answer, namely

1. What happens when the polity represented in the national policy differs in significant ways from the polity represented in the higher education institution's policy?

The national polity is a multilingual one which is represented in the graph I gave at the beginning. About 8% of this polity use English as a first language, 78% use indigenous African languages as their first language, and 14 % use Afrikaans as first language.

The polity represented by the Stellenbosch University is historically Afrikaans; currently I would guess about 70% of the students registered there have Afrikaans as first language.

Clearly this makes for some kind of conflict between the two polities. A language policy that provides for the one, may not necessarily meet the expectations of the other.

State funding for higher education is linked to the ways in which universities are made accessible to all, particularly to students from formerly marginalised communities. The University of Stellenbosch has to consider how it will diversify and still honour its commitment to using Afrikaans as a language of learning, at least at the undergraduate level.

2. How can an institutional language policy that considers seriously the language rights afforded by the national policy, secure the rights of a particular speech community that it historically represents, and at the same time honour the rights of other, historically excluded, speech communities?

To take care of the language rights of students who prefer Afrikaans as their language of learning, and at the same time to welcome and support students who do not have already developed skills in Afrikaans at an academic level, is no easy task.

Perhaps before referring to steps that have been taken to sustain Afrikaans and still diversify, I can mention that there are various national initiatives afoot that appear to show a shift towards greater support for the full diversity of language communities.:

There is a national body, PANSALB, that has for the last three years been developing policy, supporting research and encouraging implementation of provisions made by the national policy. On a national level I can also refer to the new Implementation Plan pledged in 2003 by the previous Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr Ben Ngubane, with the backing of the Cabinet, and to be taken further by the new cabinet announced a few weeks ago.

In the Western Cape there is PRAESA () an institute attached to the University of Cape Town under the leadership of Dr. Neville Alexander, who has consistently pleaded for more than lip-service to the linguistic diversity. PRAESA is doing invaluable research into what is happening "on the ground" in language classrooms.

Finally, the University of Stellenbosch has established a Language Centre that aims at providing linguistic support on a variety of levels. The Arts Faculty has in 2004 initiated a special support program for students identified as ones that may have difficulties with Afrikaans as a language of learning. Details of this program are still being worked out, but I can give some indication of what is envisaged.

How either of the two policies – of state and of university - will gain credibility, will depend not only on what kinds of resources are provided to back up implementation, but also on how those who put forward and ascribe to the overt policy succeed in closing the gap between the overt and the covert aspects. Eventually, what people DO is what determines policy more than what people SAY. Good intentions could be good beginnings – for intentions to become trusted and truly credible, we need to support what is written in law with actions that testify to attitudes that reflect what is given overtly.

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