



**CONGRÉS MUNDIAL SOBRE POLÍTQUES LINGÜÍSTIQUES**  
**CONGRÈS MONDIAL SUR LES POLITIQUES LINGUISTIQUES**  
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## LANGUAGE POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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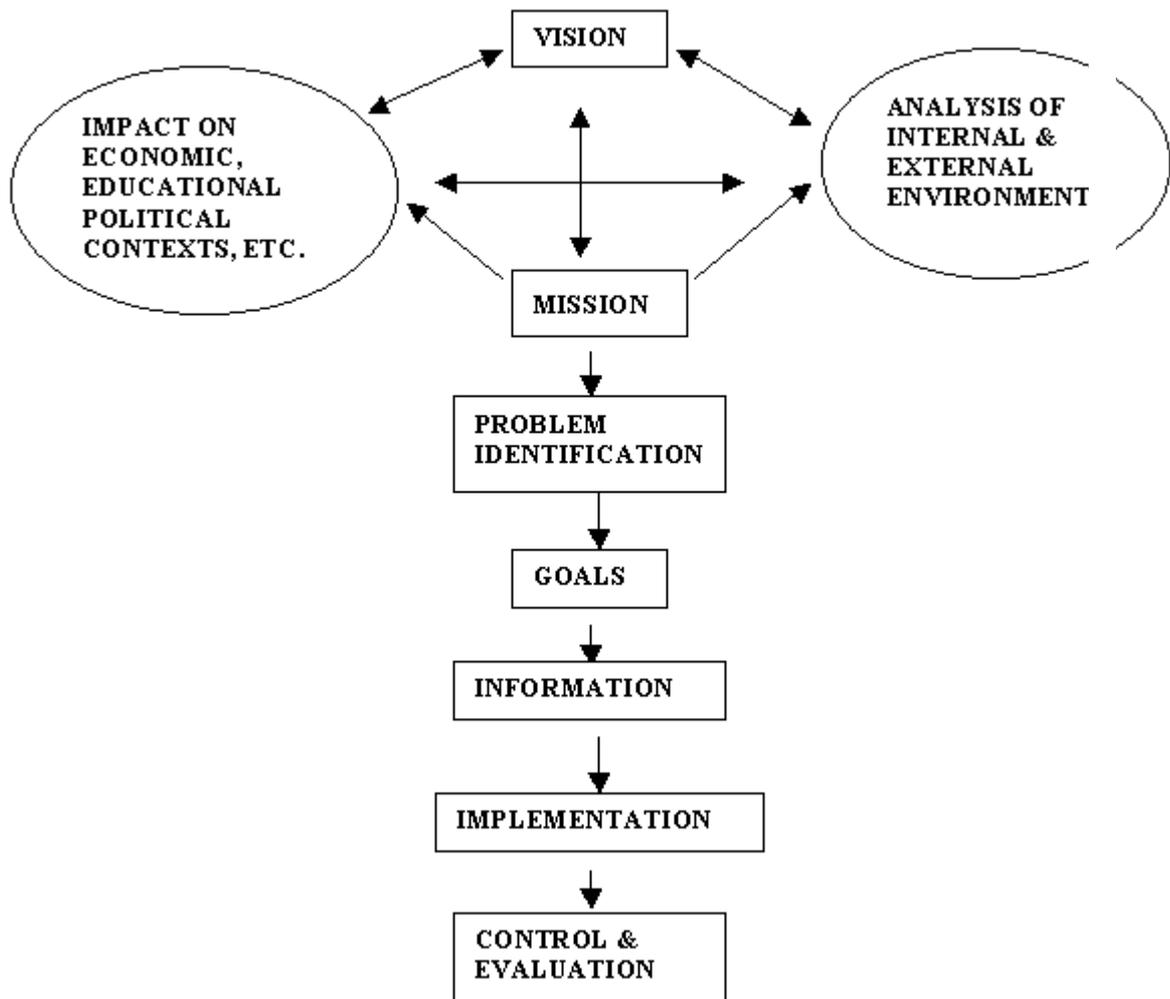
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The aim of this paper is to present a critical overview of language policy development in South Africa. Three issues will be discussed: the current state of language policy development in South Africa; the challenges and tasks of language planning in the country; and an evaluation of the process of language policy development.

The current state of language policy development in South Africa

The discussion of language policy development in South Africa will be handled from the point of view that language planning is part of the strategic planning for a country, and that language planning should thus be evaluated within the framework of strategic planning, which can be represented as in Figure 1:

**Figure 1: The strategic planning framework**



Viewing language planning as part of the strategic planning of a country means that it is regarded as an instrument in the development of the human resources of the national state, and is subordinate to the policies directed at the realisation of the state's national ideals. It is therefore necessary to take note of the country's national ideals, its vision.

South Africa's national ideals are expressed in the founding provisions of the SA Constitution, and

include the following:

- establishing democracy
- promoting equality and human rights
- developing the people of the country
- implementing affirmative action
- administering the country effectively
- developing national integration and promoting mutual tolerance and respect among the different cultural, linguistic, religious, racial and socio-political groups
- retaining the country's cultural diversity

The basic question an evaluation of language policy development in South Africa thus has to answer is how the country has set out to achieve these ideals. In order to respond to this question, two language policy development documents need to be considered: the Constitution, with its language stipulations, and the proposed SA Languages Bill.

### **The constitutional language stipulations**

The constitutional language stipulations can be regarded as a statement of the "mission" which the SA government has set itself in order to give expression to its visions and values, and the tasks it wants to perform in the language management of the country. The constitutional language stipulations are as follows:

6. (1) The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhoza and isiZulu.
- (2) Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.
- (3) (a) The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances, and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.
- (b) Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.
- (4) The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.
- (5) A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must -
  - (a) promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of -
    - (i) all official languages;
    - (ii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
    - (iii) sign language; and
  - (b) promote and ensure respect for -
    - (i) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu; and (ii) Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

As is clear from these stipulations, eleven languages can be used for official functions in the country. These eleven official languages include the two official languages of the apartheid era (Afrikaans and English) and the nine major Bantu languages of the country. The Constitution prescribes parity of esteem and equitable treatment for all eleven official languages, includes linguistic human rights as a cornerstone of public life, prohibits discrimination, commits the government to the promotion of all non-official languages commonly used by communities (including sign language, religious languages, and the country's first languages - Khoi, Nama and San), and gives explicit recognition to the principle of linguistic diversity. Together, these constitutional stipulations express a philosophy of political pluralism.

Following the announcement of the decision to recognise 11 languages as official languages, a

committee was appointed (called the Language Task Group, or LANGTAG committee) in 1996 to produce a framework for the development of a comprehensive national language policy. Their report was submitted in August, 1996. Subsequently, several workshops and seminars were presented by the government to discuss national language planning issues. Concurrently, a national body was established to promote the country's languages and to monitor the implementation of the country's language stipulations. Since its inception this body, called PanSALB, has established national and provincial language committees, as well as lexicographical units, has commissioned a language survey and has funded research. Furthermore, DACST, the state department tasked with managing language policy development, appointed a special language planning Advisory Body to propose a national language policy. This committee produced their proposals in March 2000, and their proposals have now been formulated as the SA Languages Bill, which will be presented to the Cabinet and the National Assembly in the current session of the National Assembly.

The constitutional language stipulations have been criticised in at least three ways.

The first, rather commonly expressed criticism, is that it is impossible to implement a policy of 11 official languages because it will cost too much and cannot be implemented in practice. These critics obviously assume that the intention of the constitution is that all 11 languages must be used in all official domains for all official functions. However, this is clearly not the intention. Firstly, the stipulations state explicitly that both the national government and provincial governments must use at least two official languages for government business, and secondly, the stipulations include a number of qualifying conditions (such as usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances, and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population), which must be considered in deciding on specific policies. In the case of third-level government, no number of languages is specified, suggesting that they may use only one language for official purposes. Therefore, whilst full multilingualism is in the spirit of the constitution, the language stipulations also recognise the principle of functional and demographic differentiation, and recognise the need to separate domains and levels of language policy development.

A second criticism of the language stipulations is that the principles they espouse (parity of esteem, equity, language promotion) are in potential conflict with the qualifying clauses (sometimes negatively called "escape clauses"), making it possible for state institutions to avoid adopting and implementing language policy in the spirit of the constitution.

The third criticism is that state institutions are becoming more monolingual in practice (that is, becoming more English), which means that the government is acting contrary to the spirit of the constitution.

### **The SA Languages Bill**

The second document which must be considered in deciding how SA wants to achieve its national ideals, is the proposed SA Languages Bill. This bill begins with a list of its strategic goals:

- (a) To facilitate individual empowerment and national development
- (b) To develop and promote the Bantu languages
- (c) To provide a regulatory framework for the effective management of the official languages as languages of the public service
- (d) To facilitate economic development via the promotion of multilingualism
- (e) To enhance the learning of the South African languages
- (f) To develop the capacity of the country's languages, especially in the context of technologisation

The bill proposes the following policy decisions:

- the national government to use not less than four languages for official work
- these languages to be selected from each of four categories of official languages on a rotational basis, namely:

- the Nguni languages (Ndebele, Swazi, Xhosa and Zulu)
- the Sotho languages (Pedi, Sotho and Tswana)
- Venda and Tsonga/Shangaan
- Afrikaans and English

- ” governments at provincial and local levels as well as institutions which perform public functions to be subject to the policy provisions of the bill
- ” the policy to be applicable for legislative, executive and judicial functions
- ” language units to be established for each department of the national government and each province, to implement and monitor policy implementation, to conduct language surveys and audits in order to assess existing language policies and practices, and to inform the public about the policy
- ” regulations concerning a language code of conduct for public officials to be produced

The bill also proposes a plan of implementation (what has to be done, by whom, for whom and when) for selected core activities, such as the establishment of language units, the development of a language code of conduct, and language audits. An important facet in the preparation of the bill is, of course, the question of costs, and cost-estimation has been undertaken for selected state departments.

The proposed bill is obviously not intended as an explicit policy for individual state institutions. At most it provides a framework within which further policy development must take place. Each state department (at whatever level) will need to determine its own specific policy and plan of implementation on the basis of the functions it has to perform and the types and levels of communication in which it needs to be engaged in fulfilling its functions.

Acceptance of the bill by the cabinet and the national assembly will not of course imply its immediate and full implementation at all three levels of government and in all state departments. In fact, effective policy implementation could take several years, depending on the political commitment of the heads of state departments, and national and provincial budgetary constraints.

It is not possible, as yet, to evaluate the proposed bill fully since it is still in proposal format. It does, however, seem fair to comment that the bill is not explicit enough regarding the specific strategies which need to be adopted to achieve the stated strategic goals. For example: it states that economic development must be facilitated through the promotion of multilingualism, but provides no indication as to how this goal can be achieved. The bill should, one can argue, trace the planning process from goal to implementation strategy to specific plans of implementation. This has only been done partially for two of the goals.

These two language planning documents, the constitutional language stipulations and the SA Languages Bill, then, constitute the statutory framework, the legal infra-structure, for language planning in SA. On the basis of these documents (as well as the work being undertaken by DACST and PanSALB) SA can claim to have achieved a degree of success. However, before any meaningful judgement can be made meaningful language policies have to be developed for each of the state institutions, and explicit plans of implementation need to be put in place. In order to develop these policies and establish the necessary plans of implementation, the strategic planning model needs to be followed, which means taking note of the external and internal environments relevant to further language planning.

### **The external environment**

The external environment consists of factors beyond the control of the SA government, but which impact directly on language planning in the country, either as obstacles to pluralist language policy implementation or as serious challenges to it. These factors include:

- § globalisation (particularly the powerful controlling and normalising role of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe, economically, politically and through the media)
- § Westernisation
- § technologisation
- § the power of the countries and institutions which control the global economy, and
- § the knowledge era

This last factor poses a particular challenge to language planning in any developing country such as SA. Modern-day political, economic and social forces mean that if states wish to remain a meaningful part of the global economy they will need to become highly competitive, requiring their citizens to be well-



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trained and in possession of multiple skills. The work place has increasingly become knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent, and state training institutions must therefore produce "learning individuals" equipped with broad, generic and transferable skills which will enable them to deal flexibly with varied tasks and new technologies, and equip them to handle problems and new and unpredictable developments. If South Africa wants to become globally competitive, it must obviously make certain that its training programmes produce such "learning individuals", who possess highly developed knowledge bases and high levels of transferable skills. Education has an enormous task, and language, as the fundamental instrument in learners' educational development requires serious and informed attention. Language-in-education policy practice must therefore ensure that the languages of instruction used facilitate effective educational development, and do not obstruct it.

### The internal environment

The internal environment that has to be considered in strategic language planning is constituted by the language character of the country, the language political situation, language-related problems of the country and language problems.

### The language character of SA

According to the LANGTAG Report, there are 80 languages used in SA. Table 1 contains the numbers of speakers of the main South African languages.

Languages	Speaker numbers (home language)	Census, 1996; % of pop.	Estimated knowledge second language, in %
1. Zulu	9 200 144	22.9	24.2
2. Xhosa	7 196 118	17.9	18
3. Afrikaans	5 811 547	14.4	16.5
4. Pedi	3 695 846	9.2	12.6
5. English	3 457 467	8.6	18.5
6. Tswana	3 301 774	8.2	11.3
7. Sesotho	3 104 197	7.7	10.5
8. Tsonga	1 756 105	4.4	4.7
9. Swazi	1 013 193	2.5	3.4
10. Venda	876 409	2.2	2.5
11. Ndebele	586 961	1.5	2.2

Sources: 1996 Census

Besides the main South African languages, Portuguese is said to be spoken by 57,080 persons, German by 11,740, Greek (16,780), Dutch (11,740), Italian (16,600), French (6,340) Hindi (25,900), Urdu (13,280), Gujarati (25,120), Telegu (4,000) and Tamil (24,720).

Two indigenous languages, Zulu and Xhosa, are the most widely-spoken languages of the country with Afrikaans third and English fifth. English is in second position as non-primary language. There is no general national lingua franca, but English is the lingua franca of various high-level contexts.

Functionally, English is the major language in the country, being almost the sole language of formal public contexts, with Afrikaans still a factor in the workplace, but with the Bantu languages used almost only for low-level functions, such as personal interaction, cultural expression and religious practice.

Afrikaans has the widest geographical, demographic and racial distribution, with 81.4% of the so-called

coloured community (South Africans of "mixed" racial origin) using it as home language, 57.7% of the white population, 1.5% of the Indian population and 0.7% of the black population. English is mainly an urban language, being used in most of the major cities of the country, where it is distributed across racial groups to some degree. The Bantu languages, on the other hand, are used mainly by black South Africans as home languages (1996 census), with reasonably well-defined geographical distributions.

Table 1 also suggests the widespread incidence of individual and societal multilingualism in South Africa. Indeed, the majority of black South Africans are functionally highly multilingual (and probably know about four languages each), with the rest of the population bilingual, that is, they know Afrikaans and English.

As regards the knowledge South Africans have of the country's languages (see Webb 2002b, d), the following observations can be made:

§ An adequate knowledge of the Bantu languages as primary and non-primary languages is largely restricted to black South Africans

§ English is probably known by more than 50% of the SA population at a very basic level of communication, and

§ Afrikaans by about 40%.

Proficiency in Afrikaans and English among black South Africans, however, generally only allows for basic social interaction, and is not at a level which allows their effective use in higher functions, such as educational development. A recent sociolinguistic survey commissioned by PanSALB (2001), for example, reported that 49% of their respondents often did not understand or seldom understood speeches in English. This lack of English language proficiency rose to 60% among speakers of Tswana, Ndebele and Venda, particularly among less educated respondents, respondents in rural areas, and respondents in semi-skilled or unskilled communities. The lack of English comprehension skill is also apparent in informal contexts. Respondents rated their ability to follow a story on radio or television in English as follows: Sotho: 28%, Tswana: 14%, Pedi: 19%, Swazi: 27%, Ndebele: 3%, Xhosa: 24%, Zulu: 32%, Venda: 0% and Tsonga: 24%.

#### The language political situation

The main South African languages are deeply embedded in the political history of the country. Colonialism and apartheid have meant that all of the languages have acquired socio-political meanings, with English currently highly prestigious, Afrikaans generally stigmatised, and the Bantu languages with little economic or educational value. In fact, the Bantu languages are said to be viewed by many of their own speakers as symbols of being "uneducated, traditional, rural, culturally backward people with lower mental powers", and as languages which are "sub-standard" and less capable of carrying serious thought". Though the Bantu languages, as well as Afrikaans, are numerically "major" languages, they are "minority languages" in language political terms. In terms of power and prestige, English is the major language of the country, with Afrikaans lower on the power hierarchy, and the Bantu languages effectively marginalized.

This means that the South African languages are engaged in asymmetric power relations, with English and the Bantu languages at opposite sides of the equation. This also means that English can be used for discrimination and manipulation, and may even already have become a vehicle for the struggle for power between the different socio-economic groups.

Such a language political situation is clearly a serious obstacle to achieving the type of world envisaged by South Africa's national ideals and constitution, and needs to be radically transformed. In order to begin doing so, however, it is essential that far more information on the SA languages, in particular the Bantu languages, be collected systematically through language audits on issues such as the incidence of language shift and attrition, language attitudes, the linguistic needs of the different communities, ethno-linguistic awareness in indigenous communities, cultural diversity in the country and the country's ecolinguistic realities, including the interrelationship between the languages of the country and communities' social and cultural character, and the demographic, economic, political and educational

realities.

### Language-related problems

The test of SA language policy development and implementation ultimately lies in the country's ability to resolve its language-related problems.

Language-related problems are problems which are non-linguistic by nature but in which language plays some causal role. Examples of such problems in South Africa are:

- The educational underdevelopment of many South Africans (which is a direct consequence of apartheid education - Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000; Webb 2002a, b and d)
- Non-competitive performance in the workplace, with low productivity and inefficient work performance, and generally unfair economic conditions, in particular poverty, the skewed distribution of wealth, and restricted occupational opportunities, which are all partly due to inadequate educational development, which, in turn, is a consequence of the language factor in formal education and training
- Inadequate political participation (partly due to the fact that the main language of political discourse is English), and the continuance of linguistic discrimination and inter-group conflict;
- Cultural alienation and the possible threat to the country's rich diversity, through ethnolinguistic shift and cultural assimilation to the Western world.

Language plays a fundamental role in each of these problems, and language planning in the country thus has to develop policies and strategies which will address the role of language in their resolution, ensuring that language is a facilitator rather than an obstacle to development in all these domains.

These language-related problems can obviously not be discussed fully (but see Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000, and Webb, 2002b, in press). However, some information on the role of language in educational development is provided in Tables 2 and 3 on literacy and numeracy levels in the country, obtained in an all-African survey in 1999:

**Table 2: Cumulative results for literacy task, selected provinces, 1999 (%)**

Percentage quartiles	Gauteng	KwaZulu/ Natal	Northern Province	Western Cape	Total (all provinces)
<b>75-100</b>	30.01	19.84	4.93	28.87	18.2
<b>50-75</b>	32.72	26.16	23.72	35.56	27.8
<b>25-50</b>	32.47	42.17	53.79	28.13	41.4
<b>0-25</b>	4.8	11.83	17.56	6.44	12.7
<b>MEAN RESULT</b>	60.94	51.4	42.75	60.68	41.0

Source: Strauss & Burger: 2000:7



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**Table 3: Cumulative results for numeracy task, selected provinces, 1999 (%)**

Percentage quartiles	Gauteng	KwaZulu/ Natal	Northern Province	Western Cape	Total (f provin
<b>75-100</b>	3.19	1.62	0.69	3.94	
<b>50-75</b>	15.95	9.11	4.65	20.08	
<b>25-50</b>	47.71	48.24	39.86	47.65	4
<b>0-25</b>	33.15	41.03	54.80	28.34	4
<b>MEAN</b>	26.70	31.00	25.87	37.93	3
<b>RESULT</b>					

Source: Strauss & Burger: 20

In these two tables, columns two to six contain the distribution of learners evaluated for literacy and numeracy in percentages in selected provinces. In the Northern Province, for example, only 4.93% of the total number of learners evaluated for literacy scored more than 75% for the task, while only 0.69% of them obtained scores above 75% for numeracy. Of all learners in the Northern Province, 71.35% and 94.66% scored lower than 50% for literacy and numeracy respectively, and thus cannot be regarded as adequately literate or numerate.

The role of language in educational development is also apparent from Table 4:

**Table 4: Percentage of urban tertiary learners having English L2 as medium of instruction with adequate English literacy skills in 1998 by year of passing grade (N= 5,924)**

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
<b>51</b>	35	33	31	28	25	24	22

\*Source: *Unit for language skills development*, Report, University of Pretoria

South Africa clearly has a long way to go educationally if it is to develop a well educated population, which is an essential requirement if the country is to grow economically and become competitive in the global market. The Department of Education thus needs to give very serious attention to the medium of instruction policy in SA schools.

Given the vision and mission of the SA government and the external and internal environment, it becomes clear that language planning in SA has to address several major challenges.

#### **Major language planning challenges**

In order to realise its basic objective of transformation, reconstruction and development, the SA government must obviously keep the basic language planning goal in mind, that is, to bring about a (radical) change in the language political realities of the country, creating a situation in which the languages of the country co-exist in a balanced way and function as developmental facilitators in education, the economy, political life, state administration, and the social and cultural spheres. Its language plan must therefore contribute to resolving the language-related problems discussed above. The SA government must thus not endorse a language policy proposal which will simply lead to a reproduction of the previous (and existing) language politics, where non-Bantu languages are dominant in public life and are perceived as the symbols of the ruling elite, prestige and success, and the Bantu languages are perceived as symbols of a socio-economic underclass and as instruments only of the low



functions of public life.

To achieve the general over-all goal of language political transformation where each of the official languages perform meaningful functions, language planning in SA needs to be directed at the following specific goals:

#### **Policy development**

- (1) The development of far more comprehensive language policies at provincial and local levels, and in all state departments, indicating which languages are to be used to perform which functions in the different institutions
- (2) The provision of cost-estimates for the proposed policies, with accompanying cost-effective plans of implementation for each

#### **Language politics**

The power relations between the official languages need to be balanced, so that formerly advantaged people do not continue to have an unfair advantage. This means:

- promoting linguistic tolerance actively
- changing attitudes towards the Bantu languages
- promoting the economic value of the Bantu languages (especially by developing them into instruments of access to material rewards such as employment and training opportunities)
- supporting the role of language as instruments of human rights and the construction of cultural identity, and
- maintaining the ethnolinguistic diversity of the country and ensuring that it is utilised in a meaningful way as a national asset and a resource in the national welfare

#### **Language development**

Developing the capacity of the Bantu languages for use as effective instruments for high-functions, which will necessarily entail:

- promoting their use in high-function public contexts, thus increasing their prestige and status (the constitution refers to parity of esteem, equity)
- ensuring their effective linguistic adaptation by promoting their standardisation (and the use of the standard languages), codification, technicalisation and lexicographical expansion
- increasing knowledge of these languages as L2s among non-black South Africans, but also, importantly, as L1s, especially regarding literacy in the L1 (so that all black South Africans possess the ability to control their own destiny through language, to interpret and manage the globalised, technical and competitive world and the knowledge era)

#### **Language maintenance**

This is especially necessary in the case of Afrikaans, which has lost most of its functional roles in public life due, of course, to its strong association with white dominance/apartheid. A programme of maintenance for Afrikaans obviously does not imply that Afrikaans be restored to its former position in high public contexts, but it does mean it should be allowed to function as a positive factor within the context of the over-all language plan of the country.

#### **Language restriction**

The excessively powerful public role of English is demonstrably an obstacle to national development, and its role thus needs to be curbed, with its role in public life redefined.

As we know, many agencies are generally involved in language planning programmes, ranging from bodies with national authority to individual activists. In the South African case, however, the central institution which should drive language planning is the government, since they have the moral

obligation, the authority and power, and the resources.

### **Evaluation of the language planning process in South Africa**

First of all, in order to provide a fair evaluation of language planning in SA one must take specific background issues into consideration, in particular:

- a) The legacy of apartheid, which led to distrust among racial groups and to the stigmatisation of the Bantu languages as well as concepts such as ethnicity, mother-tongue and even the notion medium of instruction)
- b) The enormous problems of national concern which the government has to handle, such as job creation; poor economic performance; health; housing; the land issue
- c) The restrictive effect of global economic and political forces on the promotion of the endogenous languages
- d) That language planning and language policy implementation are long-term processes, and language political transformation and reconstruction, such as is envisaged in SA, is extremely difficult to effect
- e) The lack of empirical research findings especially concerning the indigenous languages, through audits/language surveys

Although the country (the government) has only been seriously engaged in implementing a policy of pluralism for a period of seven years, there are several quite positive signs.

#### **Positive signs**

- a) Reasonable progress in the establishment of the legal infra-structure for language planning
- b) Strong public support by key cabinet ministers (Arts, Culture, Science and Technology; Education), as well as from important decision-makers in sectors such as the public broadcaster and the Department of Education
- c) The willingness of government to involve language planning experts in language planning, as well as scholarly participation in language policy workshops and conferences
- d) The possible emergence of ethno-linguistic awareness

There also, however, negative signs:

#### **Negative signs**

- a) Increasing institutional monolingualism
- b) Level of the public debate is not very high: not rational enough (theoretical and factual bases not strong), arguments are often still ideological in nature, speculative, with too little new and creative ideas
- c) Too little effective language planning research and the absence of any co-ordination of existing research projects
- d) Too little effective support for linguistic pluralism from important decision-makers at senior levels of government
- e) Continued emotional resistance to the Bantu languages
- f) The lack of public support among public leaders generally for the 11 language policy

#### **Conclusion**

Though it is too early to evaluate language planning in South Africa, one can, for interest's sake ask whether SA could become an example of effective pluralist language planning, and whether other equally multilingual countries may learn from the South African experience?

These questions can't, of course, be answered in an interesting way at the moment. All one can say, is that, if the country does succeed in achieving its LP goals at some time in the future, it may, possibly,

contribute in the following ways to a better understanding of LP theory and practice:

- (a) The manner in which bottom/up language planning can be handled to complement the necessary top/down planning
- (b) The way in which an effective balance can be established between a pluralist language policy and costs (through the practical realisation of the principle of functional differentiation)
- (c) The degree to which language can perform a role in transformation, reconstruction and national development and in overcoming social and econotechnical (K&B) inequalities
- (d) The way in which multilingualism can be utilised as a developmental resource
- (e) How a balanced, meaningful co-existence between different languages as expressions of differing cultural identities can be produced
- (f) How a pluralist philosophy of state can be converted into reality/practice

But it is still too early to claim any such contribution to LP theory and practice by the SA experience, and to judge whether SA contains any meaningful lessons for comparably multilingual states.

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