

The South African English Language Scene Within A (Global) Holographic Triadic Context

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper is on the triangulated work of the 1996 South African Constitution, the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), and one of the latter's eleven language subsidiaries: the English National Language Body (ENLB), with special reference to the ENLB's likewise triadic projects on literature; on variation and standardisation; and on language in education. It thus deals with both macro- and micro-policy issues.

My choice of title is predicated upon the proposition that discourse in language is evidently much like the traditional African cooking pot, standing firm on three legs. An explication of the title's invocation of a holographic triad follows, with examples of triple categorizations of usage from Randolph Quirk, Stanley Ridge and Braj Kachru. Informed by the medieval educator's emphasis on acquisition of the 3Rs and the 2008 Oxford Round Table's call for a three-pronged approach, the discussion explores aspects of proficiency, education (multilingual rather than bilingual) and acquisition, shifting from practice to policy making and implementation in South Africa, including Richard Ruiz's three types of orientation to language in policy and planning: language as problem, language as right, and language as resource. The paper makes early reference to and ends with references to Judge Albie Sachs's sage caveat and his injunction for all to take part in the language discussion, respectively. I close with my own plea for a paradigm shift from prescription to choice and from rigidity to balance.

Introduction

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Informed by the medieval educator's emphasis on acquisition of the 3Rs and the 2008 Oxford Round Table's call for a three-pronged approach, the discussion explores aspects of proficiency, education (multilingual rather than bilingual) and acquisition, shifting from practice to policy making and implementation in South Africa, and embracing Richard Ruiz's (1990)¹ three types of orientation to language in policy and planning, *viz.* language as problem, language as right, and language as resource. My choice of title is predicated

¹ See Wright, Laurence. 2006. Language and value: Towards accepting a richer linguistic ecology for South Africa. Unpublished, Institute for the Study of English in Africa, Grahamstown.

upon the proposition that discourse in language is much like the African cooking pot, standing firm on three legs, but is, at the same time, multifaceted or prismatic. An explication of the invocation of this holographic triad concludes this paper with examples of triple categorization of usage from Randolph Quirk (UK), Stanley Ridge (South Africa) and Braj Kachru (India).

Judge Albie Sachs's caveat is pertinent:

No sane person would rush into print on the language question. It is so intricate and so laden with emotion that you are bound to offend many and please few. Yet debate there must be. Someone must take the initiative.²

PanSALB's English National Language Body

In line with the triangulated formula above, the discussion begins with the third tier of the PanSALB organizational structure (consisting of a national *board*, nine provincial *committees*, eleven language *bodies* and a number of lexicographic *units*). The general brief of the National Language Bodies was to advise PanSALB, and to standardise the languages concerned.³ One of eleven such bodies, the English NLB,⁴ has, for five years, concentrated on three specific areas: literature; and, in line with Quirk and Crystal,⁵ standardisation and varieties, and, thirdly, language in education.

These three subcategories are treated sequentially. Owing to an already extensive, established corpus, in South Africa and abroad, the Literature Technical Committee has focused on: the role of English literature in a multilingual society, access to texts, core texts

² Sachs, A. 1994, p. i.

³ Titlestad, P. J. H. 2006. English NLB, five year report May, p. 4.

⁴ Meeting once a year for five years, this body, which includes high-quality academics, is headed by Professor Peter Titlestad and includes the Institute for the Study of English, the [English] Dictionary Unit and the National English Literary Museum (NELM).

⁵ See Quirk, R. 1995, p. 11 and Crystal, D. 2003, p. 185, who argue convincingly that, within the varieties of englishes and excluding accent, there is an international and reasonably homogeneous standard English.

for libraries, the promotion of literacy, and archiving and translation – testing the viability of translation into and the effects of retranslation from the nine ‘black’ languages. The co-opted National English Literary Museum (NELM) has compiled a memorandum of its archiving and information services, offering either to extend its services to all language bodies (funds permitting), or to assist in the establishment of other such literature museums.

Acknowledging the unique position of English vis à vis the other official languages, with its existing dictionaries and grammars, and the complex international debates on standards,⁶ a priority was to determine what the function of the English NLB should be with regard to standardisation. A subcommittee on Variation and Standardisation was formed and chose to concentrate on the *domains* of language use: on the varieties of English used, for example, in health care or education, identifying trends and compiling a database. In answer to the question: ‘What are the functions of English, and can other languages take over these functions in South Africa?’ a series of essays pertaining to key issues has also been undertaken, addressing multilingualism (identity and interaction); domains (register and diglossia); variation; and language policy (possibilities and limitations).

The third task team, the Language-in-Education group, acknowledges the need to prioritize ‘the promotion of multilingualism’⁷ (a term itself requiring careful definition), but has limited its research to the way in which English interacts with other languages in the educational domain, with the objective of clarifying ‘the domains of knowledge underpinning the development of lexicons, and the extent to which they are primarily

⁶ As Peter Titlestad (2006) notes, this created difficulties for the English NLB, which acknowledged the fact that some scholars place great emphasis on local varieties rather than the standard variety, however the latter may be defined, while the emphasis in the area of the ‘African’ languages seems to be the need to standardise (p.4).

⁷ Titlestad, P. J. H. 2006, pers. comm.

focused on school criteria'.⁸ An academic word list, based on the work of Paul Nation and Xue Guo-yi, was compiled for tertiary education. This was not unanimously endorsed by the ENLB and was rejected outright at a fairly recent report session to PanSALB (scheduled for September 2006, but taking place only in February 2008). A projected third area of concentration is to be an investigation into standards of English in the school-leaving examination.

The South African Constitution and PanSALB: proficiency in language, multilingual education and English language acquisition

The provisions in the South African Constitution (1996) for 'equity' (SECTION 29[2] a) of use in education, plus 'parity of esteem' and equitable 'treatment' (SECTION 6[4]2) among all eleven official languages have received careful attention elsewhere.⁹ In line with the principles of democratic governance, consultation with interested citizens and officials preceded the finalization of the language clauses in the Constitution,¹⁰ which were then formulated by the best legal minds. However desirable such refinement of policy may be, the question of effectiveness arises, and this naturally refers to the problematic implementation of the letter *and* spirit of the law regarding all official languages.

Axiomatic to implementation are problems of proficiency and perception, as noted in PanSALB's Implementation Plan (2003 PARAGRAPH 1[5], p.10):

Although English provides access to job opportunities and education, it is at the same time an obstacle to people with lack of proficiency. In as much as English is viewed as the key to socio-economic mobility and prestige it poses a threat to the use and maintenance of the indigenous languages and the implementation of a policy of multilingualism.

⁸ Titlestad, P. J. H. 2006, p. 7.

⁹ See, for example, Titlestad 1993; Ridge 2000; and Makoni 2003.

¹⁰ See, for example, De Lange 1981; Schuring 1992; NCHE Report 1995; Langtag Report 1996.

This extract raises a triumvirate of issues: lack of proficiency; the perception of English as a threat; and, what is meant by an indigenous language.¹¹ To accommodate the focus of the Round Table, these are treated briefly in reverse order.

Indigenous language

For the word ‘indigenous’, the Collins *Dictionary of Synonyms of the English Language* (1877) gives ‘born or originating in a country’; the 1999 *New Oxford Dictionary of English* gives ‘originating or occurring naturally in a particular place’. Thus all, who are South African by birth, should be regarded as indigenous. Perhaps recognising this, the 1996 *A Dictionary of South African English on historical principles* has no entry at all for the word *indigenous*.

English as a threat

These definitions not only erase the notion of English as a threat,¹² but also accord with PARAGRAPH 6[5] of the Constitution, which calls for the establishment of a Pan South African Language Board, ‘to promote and create conditions for the development and use’ of ‘all official languages’. However, the PanSALB Act (1995), in contradistinction to the Constitution refers to ‘the *equal* use and enjoyment of all the official South African languages’ (SECTION 3.a.i). As ‘equal use’ is patently impossible, I reiterate a cautionary statement – to which I shall return in closing – that I made early in the multilingual planning process, in 1992, in a Human Sciences Research Council publication about prescriptive language and cultural practices:

¹¹ Coincidentally, many languages have children’s rhymes involving the numerals one, two, three as an aid to counting. Toddlers, for example, are often taught:

One, two, three, mother caught a flea; /Father caught a bigger one, and put it in his tea. / When he put the milk in, the flea began to hop; /When he put the sugar in, the flea went pop!

¹² The motto of the English Academy of Southern Africa is ‘promoting English as a vital national resource’ putting the focus firmly on the usefulness of English and, likewise, effectively erasing any sense of privilege and so of perceived threat. It has also continued its work as lobbyist for all languages.

The seeds of revolution will inevitably be sown if any effort in regulation and law is made to relegate to a second tier any language or culture. This is, and would become, a fertile ground for [an] extravagant response.¹³

Lack of proficiency

Notwithstanding the idealism of PanSALB's desire for 'equal use' of the official languages and its inherent unconstitutionality, the Board has done sterling work, not least of which has been the sobering finding in its national sociolinguistic survey of 2000 about the perceived threat of English: that 'proficiency in English is less widespread than expected . . . [and] that more than 40% of the people in South Africa often do not understand what is being communicated in English' (Implementation Plan, PARAGRAPH 1[5] p.10). What is alarming, is that this finding is no different from those of the Human Sciences Research Council in 1981 (*The Provision of Education in South Africa*) and Stellenbosch University's study on language mastery in the classroom in 1985 [Odendaal]. Discussing proficiency and instruction in English in South Africa, Odendaal pointed out that

In many cases, pupils enter secondary school with very little English. Because pupils cannot communicate in English, teachers who, in many cases, have an inadequate grasp of English themselves frequently resort to mother tongue, particularly in subjects other than English.¹⁴

Both Jansen (1993) and Maja (1994) point out that, in many schools, the teacher's mother tongue may not be that of the learners, further disadvantaging the pupil. Yet more alarming was Odendaal's reading and writing competence test for teachers in which he found that only between 0.3% and 57.3 % of his 333 sample group of first phase teachers, that is, primary educators were proficient in English.¹⁵ Clearly, such a parlous state of pedagogic practice must impact on language across the curriculum. The situation is, of course, aggravated by the fact that the bulk of educational resources are written in the global *lingua*

¹³ Gray, R. (in Schuring 1992), p. 1.

¹⁴ 1985, p. ii.

¹⁵ 1985, p. 33.

franca, thus demanding a high level of proficiency. Odendaal found, for example, that 65.8% of pupils did not understand Science textbooks; 62.5% had the same problem with Geography; and 60.4% could not comprehend History texts.¹⁶ These findings were endorsed by the Third International Mathematics and Science survey completed in 1997 in which 20.1% of South African learners stated that they never used the language of instruction (either English or Afrikaans) outside the classroom.¹⁷ A 2006 first phase reading ability survey confirmed these findings. Little, therefore, has been achieved in remedying basic proficiency in the past twenty years, and the situation is exacerbated by the current brain drain.¹⁸

A global holographic triadic context

The 2008 Oxford Round Table called for a triadic response to the language debate. In his survey of English language acquisition (formal and informal)¹⁹ and proficiency in a global context, world renowned linguist, Randolph Quirk refers to a ‘threefold manifestation of English’, identifying the categorisation of usage around the world: first, English as a foreign language (EFL), secondly, English as a second language (ESL), and thirdly, English as a native language (ENL).²⁰ Closer to home, Stanley Ridge prefers the arguably less culturally hegemonic FL, L2 and L1,²¹ which perspicuitly acknowledges a variety of mother tongues other than English, while Braj Kachru (1991), likewise focusing on usage (proficient or otherwise in terms of Standards), sets the cat among the pigeons with his three concentric circles. He argues for an inner circle of mother-tongue englishes; an outer circle of institutionalised or nativised englishes (such as Nigerian English), perpetuated,

¹⁶ 1985, p. 46. Afrikaans was the one exception: these learners had had textbooks in their mother tongue for all subjects for many years.

¹⁷ Gray, D. J. 1997, p. 252.

¹⁸ Scores of teachers of English have joined the brain drain, mostly white male teachers who are unable to secure permanent teaching posts due to the government policy of transformation. These problems, in turn, raise ethical or moral issues in educational policy and practice.

¹⁹ Formal teaching method as well as the ‘painless’ absorption of a mother tongue.

²⁰ 1985, p. 2.

²¹ 2004, n. p.

one deduces, by national education systems and governments; and, finally, an ever expanding circle of foreign englishes (such as Japanese English or English for international use).²² However, the inner circle tends to evince a variety of informal or colloquial dialects (Scottish and South African English [SAE], for example) in addition to a variety of international standard englishes; and the outermost home-grown, foreign varieties or creoles, such as Black South African English (BSAE).

As supporting evidence of this last claim, two doctoral studies I promoted are cited. In her study, conducted at the University of Venda for Science and Technology, Nandi Neeta (2005) found a campus-wide complacency with a Kachru-type inner circle of Tshivenda-English, where ‘Clarify me!’—for ‘Kindly elucidate’/‘Please explain’—presents no communicative barrier.²³ A few additional examples extracted from Phyllis Kaburise’s²⁴ investigation into communicative competence on the same campus serve to illustrate the structural (form) and pragmatic (function) status of selected utterances of entry-level second language students as well as the researcher’s telling analysis thereof:

CONTEXT	UTTERANCE	SPEAKER’S INTENTION	RESEARCHER’S COMMENT ON THE NATURE OF THESE BLEMISHES
1 A student accused of being late by the lecturer reported this to her friend by saying:	The lecturer said I was late but I denied.	Complaint	Semantic blemish. Communication not achieved (204).
2 A student who failed to hand in an assignment on the due date said:	I am asking to be apologised due to my failure.	Request	Communication did take place, despite identified structural shortcomings (171).
3 A student anxiously awaiting the results of her supplementary examination said:	I feel hopeless for this week.	Statement	There is confusion between the meaning of ‘hopeless’ and ‘no hope’. In such a construction, it is not the speaker who is without hope but rather the situation which does not look promising, as in ‘There seems to be little/no hope of my getting my results this week’ (232). Communication did take place.

²² See Abbott 1991, p. 55.

²³ Purists would be familiar with the notion of ‘clarifying butter’ and would, of course, be able to re-encrypt the telegraphic version of ‘Please clarify what you have said for me’.

²⁴ 2004, pp. 169--232.

The fact that Kaburise can assert that communication was achieved in two out of three of these utterances indicates the level of language tolerance in specific socio-cultural contexts. Paradoxically, this implies that English should be “unstandardised” while the African languages should be standardised. This accords with the motivation behind language planning in South Africa. Pointing to the spirit rather than the letter of the law, Albie Sachs²⁵ explains that the move from bilingualism [or indeed unilingualism] to multilingualism ‘in essence involves a shift from prescription to choice and from rigidity to balance’. The principles of usage are of ‘non-diminution and extension’, while those of discussion are ‘of open debate and the free clash of opinions’.

Perhaps in recognition of the essentially multi-layered nature of language usage, fraught as it is with inherent political, socio-cultural and emotional baggage, South African authorities have, in their turn, adopted a triple approach to language policy and planning – this last triad being the concern of this brief presentation. Globally, this, too, seems to be tripartite. I return to Richard Ruiz’s (1990) three types of orientation to language in policy and planning: language as *problem*, language as *right*, and language as *resource*.²⁶

Policy and planning

Language as *problem* and language as *right* fall within the ambit of a policy approach, while language as *resource* belongs more nearly to a cultivation approach²⁷—signifying legislative aspects, on the one hand, and communicative pragmatics, on the other. As

²⁵ 1994, p. 5 & p. 15.

²⁶ See Wright, 2006.

²⁷ I am using Jiri Neustupny’s (1970) terms somewhat more loosely than I perhaps should to signify legislative aspects, on the one hand, and communicative pragmatics, on the other. As Laurence Wright notes (n. d.) in explication of Neustupny’s usage: ‘The policy approach treats matters such as national and regional languages, standardisation, problems of language stratification, literacy levels, orthographies, and so forth. It is normally characterised by a high level of ethno-political concern focused on underprivileged communities in modernising societies, on the one hand. The cultivation approach, on the other hand, addresses issues of lexical development, appropriacy of linguistic registers for specialised functions, language education issues, the identification and easing of constraints impinging on language competence, and so on. It is generally associated with modern industrial societies.’

Quirk²⁸ notes, the model for access to learning, the media and the business community ‘should continue to be Standard English, the “general public English” of world currency’ (as on All-India Radio, the BBC’s World Service, and the American CNN), because English, he argues, is ‘firmly global’ and ‘universally useful [*sic*]’. Abbott,²⁹ by contrast, while conceding that a national standard is needed ‘solely for *intranational* purposes’, calls for ‘a sort of “Commonwealth of Englishes”’.

Normative, that is, the ethical or moral aspects of education policy formulation and implementation are particularly important. As T. M. Reagan of the University of Connecticut asserts, ‘such policies address issues of equity, fairness, justice, opportunity, and both in individual and corporate rights’.³⁰ Robert Cooper astutely observes:

That language planning should serve so many covert goals is not surprising: language is the fundamental institution of society, not only because it is the first institution experienced by the individual but also because all other institutions are built upon its regulatory patterns . . . To plan language is to plan society.³¹

For a policy to be effective, it must not only be practicable, but also desirable.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper examines both policy and implementation. Examples are taken from practice within the triangular paradigm of proficiency, education and acquisition. Another triad is relevant here: first, the South African Constitution and, secondly, its organs—the Pan South African Language Board and one of its subsidiaries—the English National Language Body. The main thrust is the proactive steps taken by the English NLB in the last few years,

²⁸ See Quirk: English for access pamphlet (n. d. pp. 1--2) and Quirk, Randolph. 1995. *Grammatical and lexical variance in English*. London and New York: Longman.

²⁹ Abbott, Gerry. 1991. English across cultures: the Kachru catch. *English Today* 28, 7(4):55.

³⁰ 1992, p. 1.

³¹ 1989, p. 182.

within the context of policy making and its application within a multilingual rather than bilingual context.

In closing this holographic or prismatic triadic discussion, I return to Albie Sachs's injunction: 'Language concerns us all, and we must all take part in the discussion.'³² Foucault reminds us that power can never be exerted unilaterally by superior over inferior. No force can be imposed by the dominator in a vacuum, but its action is complicated by interdependence with the dominated. English cannot be a megalithic structure crushing intimidated languages around it. By regarding English as the devouring giant and languages with fewer or even a much larger number of users³³ as helpless victims, one is giving credence to a banal model of empire and colony. The social porosity of language, together with political fluctuations in *any* state, displays notions of a fixed duality. Similarly, in linguistics, we need to resist any binary paradigms of prescription versus description, functionality versus preservation, or autocracy versus democracy. Power is exchanged, not imposed. Trying to foist Afrikaans on Soweto children lit the fuse to riots and liberation. Before that, brutal English suppression of Afrikaans may have guaranteed its resilient survival. Our task now is to celebrate the diversity of our languages. To fear dominance is to invite it. We might, instead, stand back to marvel at the coruscating facets of various pyramidal structures of language to lighten and darken upon constantly changing axes of power and time, decay and resurgence. My own plea is for a paradigm shift from prescription to choice, and from rigidity to balance. The South African government has gone some way in addressing this plea by acknowledging the inherited practice of

³² 1994, p. 1 – Sachs's note for the second impression.

³³ In South Africa, there were approximately three-and-a-half million English mother tongue users compared with seven-and-a-half million Afrikaans first language speakers and eleven million Zulu speakers in 1999. The most recent statistics (DSACR 2005) for these languages cite 8.2 million (English), 13.3 (Afrikaans) and 23.8 million (isiZulu).

bilingualism while allowing the nine provinces to choose the most suitable third official provincial language.³⁴

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³⁴ The Western Cape, for instance, has chosen isiXhosa in addition to English and Afrikaans, while KwaZulu-Natal has chosen isiZulu and Gauteng has Sepedi (formerly Northern Sotho).

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