

# Language Contact, Language Policy and Education in South Africa

## *Contato de Línguas, Política de Idiomas e Educação na África do Sul*

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**Abstract:** Languages users may cause violence and racism: in 1976, protests against the imposition of Afrikaans at South African schools became a massacre when the police killed 172 native protesters. But, which language to choose as language of instruction since South Africa counts eleven official languages. Therefore, this paper discusses whether English should be South Africa's sole language of instruction, to stimulate the native population's presence at universities. To support the research, governmental documents on language policy and education have been examined. Also, the linguistic diversity of South African English through language contact has been described. South Africa's language policy underlines education in vernacular languages at public schools, whereas English is used at universities. This generates a low proficiency in English; therefore, many native South Africans do not enroll at universities. The result is once again an Apartheid-like segregation, which calls for the use of English as the sole language of education.

**Keywords:** Language Contact; South Africa; Language Policies; Education.

**Resumo:** Usuários de línguas podem causar violência e racismo: em 1976, protestos relacionados a imposição do africâner nas escolas sul-africanas provocaram um massacre quando a polícia matou 172 nativos. Mas, escolher qual língua como língua de instrução, já que a África do Sul possui onze idiomas oficiais? Portanto, o objetivo deste artigo é questionar se inglês deve ser a única língua de instrução

na África do Sul para estimular a presença de nativos sul-africanos nas universidades. Para apoiar a pesquisa, documentos governamentais sobre política de idiomas e educação foram examinados. O artigo também descreve a diversidade linguística do inglês sul-africano através do contato de línguas. A política sul-africana promove educação em línguas vernáculas nas escolas públicas, enquanto inglês é a língua nas universidades. Isso causa uma baixa proficiência em inglês, resultando em menos nativos nas universidades. Então, novamente, há segregação, como no *Apartheid*, implicando no uso do inglês como único idioma na educação.

**Palavras-chave:** Contato de Línguas; África do Sul; Política linguística; Educação.

## 1 Introduction

Language can be the cause of violence, hatred, prejudice and racism, even among fellow countrymen. As a striking example may be mentioned the violent protests of the Flemish language movement in Belgium during the 1960s and 1970s. This Flemish movement strived for emancipation of the Flemish language. However, an even more bloodthirsty example of language related protests occurred in South Africa.

On June the sixteenth, 1976, parents, students and teachers protested in the streets of Soweto against the imposition of the Afrikaans language in schools. This peaceful protest became a blood bath when the police started to shoot at the students. This police brutality provoked months of violence and resulted in the death of 172 natives and indigenous. Since then, the South African government has withdrawn Afrikaans from the curriculum of public schools.

However, the problem remains what language to choose as the language of instruction since South Africa possesses an impressive amount of eleven official languages (English, Afrikaans, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu, Ndele, Northern Soto and Soto) within its national borders. The situation becomes even more complicated as The Ministry of Education (2009: 3) declares in the Curriculum of South Africa language policy that: “everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions”.

Furthermore, the Language in Education Policy (LIEP) recommends that: “schools (depending on their needs) adopt either one language as a medium for learning (home language) or use two languages, a home language in the early grades and a second one later as language of learning” (Ministry of Education 2009: 3). Thus, primary schools are allowed to use several languages of instructions.

None the less, most public native and indigenous schools use African vernacular languages in the first four years, the foundation years. After that period, the language of instruction (LOI) is English. Public schools where the students are Afrikaans and English adopt mostly English as LOI. It must be noted that the LOI in some private schools is Afrikaans. Higher education, such as universities, adopts mostly English as LOI, as confirmed by the South African government: “Evidence suggests that the majority of universities and technikons use English as the sole medium of instruction” (Ministry of Education 2009: 6).

Nevertheless, it is noted that one of the most prestigious universities of South Africa, Stellenbosch University, adopts Afrikaans as Language of Instruction. Therefore, since according to the law, each school can decide what language to adopt as LOI, the policy on the Language of Instruction remains unclear and confusing.

The result is that many native and indigenous South Africans, due to a low proficiency in English, hardly attend higher education, although the government<sup>1</sup> stimulates the use of indigenous languages as it is “the role of all our languages working together to build a common sense of nationhood” (Department of Education 2002: 8). However, this noble statement, although respecting the rich linguistic and cultural importance of the indigenous population, ignores the fact that the indigenous population due to this policy hardly enters higher education.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to question the South African Department of Education’s language policy whether the language of instruction in South Africa should preferably be solely in English, as the vernacular languages have withheld many South Africans from obtaining a higher education. To support the research, official documents from the South African Department of Education on language policy and education have been examined.

Also, aspects of South African English, concerning general features and influences through language contact in order to understand South Africa’s complicated and interesting linguistic situation have been studied. The South African linguistic situation will be described first, followed by an examination of South Africa’s language policies.

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<sup>1</sup>In the Language Policy for Higher Education, November 2002.

## 2 General features of South African English

The South African government recognizes an impressive amount of eleven official languages. According to the South African governmental census of 2001, the most spoken home language is IsiZulu (23.8%). The third spoken home language is Afrikaans (13.3%), whereas English is only to be found as the sixth spoken home language (8.2%). Despite this modest position, English holds an important intermediating position regarding education, entertainment, commerce and public affairs as a so-called *Lingua Franca*, or bridge language (Jenkins 2010).

South African English (SAE) is divided into three social variations: Cultivated, General and Broad. Cultivated South African English is spoken among the upper-class and resembles the British Received pronunciation. General SAE is associated with the middle-class and Broad SAE with the Afrikaans descendent working class (McArthur 1998).

A phonological aspect of SAE is the Kit Split. Historical [i] undergoes a phonemic split. Thus, we find an allophonic variation between the close, front [i] and the somewhat more central [ɪ]. Likewise, the vowel as in *bath* is pronounced in General and Broad SAE as open and in the back of the mouth. Furthermore, SAE tends to non-rhoticity in upper-class speech; the [R] is, as in British Received Pronunciation, not pronounced in mid and final position. A distinctive feature of SAE in Broad speech is the absence of aspirated plosives (McArthur 1998).

A morphological feature of SAE concerns singular demonstrative with plural noun complement. Especially Afrikaans speakers when speaking English fail to put into practice the agreement patterns. Thus, they do not distinguish between a singular and plural demonstrative. For example, I'd better go and pick up *this bags*, instead of *these bags*. The Syntax of SAE is characterised by the deletion of verbal complements, causing that the complement or complements of intransitive and transitive verbs are omitted. For instance: 'Oh, good, you've got Ø<sup>2</sup>' and 'Did you give Ø Ø?' So, there is no target, beneficiary and/or proposition (McArthur 1998). The lexicon and more examples of South African English will be discussed in the language contact section, as the characteristics of South African English are considerably marked by this linguistic phenomenon.

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<sup>2</sup> Ø describes an omission, in this case of *it*.

### 3 The South African English vocabulary and language contact

South African English contains many loanwords from indigenous languages and Afrikaans. This linguistic influence on SAE was brought on by a lack to describe local phenomena in an English equivalent. Some examples of indigenous borrowings are, according to McArthur (1998): *Gogga*: Insect, bug, from Khoikhoi. *Gogo*: grandmother or elderly woman, from isiZulu. *Imbizo*: Gathering called by a traditional leader or meeting, from IsiZulu. *Imbongi*: Traditional praise singer, from isiXhosa and isiZulu. *Indaba*: conference or expo, from isiZulu and isiXhosa. *Inyanga*: Traditional herbalist and healer, from Nguni.

However, McArthur (1998) states that fifty percent of the SAE vocabulary is based on Afrikaans. Mestrie (1995) has estimated that ninety-five percent of Afrikaans originates from the Dutch language. The Dutch language was brought to South Africa by Dutch settlers, when the explorer Van Riebeeck founded a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652.

According to Cable and Baugh (1978), English is spoken in South Africa since the British seized the Cape of Good Hope in 1795. Before that, South Africa was a farming settlement mainly dominated by Dutch colonists. The Dutch and English did not merge and kept mostly to their own group, due to mixed interests as the Dutch were mostly agricultural interested, and the British trade interested.

Additionally, as described by Llewellyn (1936), the gold rush of the 19<sup>th</sup> century attracted many British immigrants, but the *Boer Wars*<sup>3</sup> initiated the first real language contact. These wars provoked the sending of 300,000 British soldiers. These English soldiers were taught Afrikaans words and phrases for a better understanding of their enemies. Consequently, borrowings from Afrikaans are abundant. An important group consists of geographical names, such as towns: Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, Kaapstad, Utrecht, Potchefstroom, Kroonstad, Midrand, Stellenbosch, Welkom, Witbank, Krugersdorp and Rustenburg, amongst others.

Other examples as listed by McArthur (1998), Crystal (1997) and Llewellyn (1936) that concern Afrikaans geographical names in South African English include: *berg* (mountain), *kloof* (valley), *rand* (edge), *bush* (in Dutch: bos), *rooibos* (sagebrush), *veldt* (field), *drift* (flow of a river) and *kop* (top of mountain).

Likewise, many borrowings from Afrikaans that relate to flora and fauna have been borrowed by South African English. For example: *reebok* (antelope), *aardvark* (groundhog), *boomslang* (a kind of snake), *meerkat* (a wild cat), *springbok* (a kind of antelope). (Crystal 1997, Llewellyn 1936.

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<sup>3</sup> 1880-1881 and 1898-1902.

Daily life contact between the Dutch-Afrikaans settlers and the British has also caused the influx of a great deal of borrowings. Some examples are: *Afrikaans* (the language of the Dutch settlers), *biltong* (a kind of steak), *boer* (a farmer), *braai* (barbeque), *Hottentot* (a denomination for indigenous people), *outlander* (a foreigner, mostly used for the British), *sparerib*, from *ribbespeer* (Crystal (1997). Besides these examples, Afrikaans has been responsible for the influx of vocabulary related to warfare into SAE due to the aforementioned *Boer Wars*: *laager* (a fortified camp), *spoor* (a track), *kommando* (a command) and *trek* (voyage). (Llewellyn 1936).

### 3.1 *The syntax of South African English and language contact*

Besides the Dutch-Afrikaans influence on South African English vocabulary, Afrikaans also influenced South African English regarding syntax. An example of this phenomenon is *no* as affirmative sentence initiators. Thus, speakers of South African English might utter: 'How are you? No, I'm fine'. It must be stipulated that the use of *no* as affirmative sentence initiators depends on the social class of the speaker. For instance, speakers of Broad South African English are more inclined to use *no* as affirmative sentence initiators than the other classes of speakers of South African English (McArthur 1998).

Furthermore, McArthur (1998) describes another example of the Afrikaans influence on the South African English syntax, namely the use of *busy* plus a progressive. An example of this feature is: 'I'm busy waiting for the bus'. This phenomenon is a quite common feature of Afrikaans. Again, in this case the use of *busy* plus a progressive depends on the social class of the speaker. Mostly speakers of Broad South African English tend more to use *busy* plus a progressive than the other speakers of South African English.

### 3.2 *The pronunciation of South African English and language contact*

The pronunciation of South African English also underwent influence from the indigenous languages and Afrikaans. For instance, Afrikaans and the Bantu languages lack the Received Pronunciation vowel as in *trap*: /æ/. The pronunciation of this vowel in South African English can be produced as /e/, resulting in ['trep]. Also, the /g/ sound is pronounced as [y], due to the Afrikaans influence (Wells 1982).

Furthermore, in Afrikaans, /r/ is often realized as the [ʁ], which represents a voiceless fricative uvular, even though in the region of the former Cape Province it is produced as the uvular thrill [r] (Donaldson 1993). Some speakers of South African English have also incorporated this phenomenon into their pronunciation. Once again, it must be noted though, that these variations in pronunciation depend on class, region and education. The upper-class speakers of English in South Africa tend more to the R. P. pronunciation of British English (Kortmann 2004).

#### **4 Africa's language and educational policies in the past, present and future**

It is noted, based on the previous sections on the language contact in South Africa, that the country is linguistically very rich but also very divided. Unfortunately, South Africa has also been divided through its politics regarding race due to Apartheid. This meant that South Africa was segregated and divided into two parts; the white population and the native indigenous population. This segregation was not only social and political, but also educational-based, as can be gathered from South Africa's policy on language and education.

The educational system during the colonial times was already marked by segregation and the language issue. The white Afrikaans population were taught in schools connected to the Dutch Reformed Church, whereas the indigenous population were taught by their tribe elders. Later, the indigenous population, not allowed to attend the Afrikaans schools, were taught in British mission schools.

The Afrikaans population used Afrikaans as language of instruction, whereas the mission schools used English. The Afrikaans population stayed reluctant to be taught in English, because English was considered as the language of the British oppressor. Higher education was also divided into two languages: the English-speaking population attended government schools (the multicultural South African College of the University of Cape Town). and the Afrikaner population attended the Dutch Reformed Church supervised schools (Federal Research Division Library of Congress 1996).

This separation of Afrikaans and English language-based education even widened after the British victory in the *Boer Wars*, when after these wars the government granted financial support for Afrikaans-language based education to calm down the defeated Afrikaans population. The independence of South Africa (1910) was responsible for even more segregation, principally regarding the native indigenous population. This segregation eventually led to Apartheid and the Bantu Education Act (1953).

This act, under National Socialist influence, aimed at keeping education 'pure', and caused the elimination of financial aid for native and indigenous schools. Thus, attending higher education for the native indigenous South African population was obstructed even more. This was motivated by Verwoerd's (minister of native affairs) statement that native South Africans "should be educated for their opportunities in life" and that there was no place for them "above the level of certain forms of labour". These statements depict clearly the government's intentions regarding segregation (Federal Research Division Library of Congress 1996: 89).

Indeed, the outcome of the Bantu Education Act was that the native population was excluded from higher education. Also, the governmental policy on language

contributed to this, as the mother tongue of each ethnic group became the language of instruction for each group. Thus, as higher education was in Afrikaans or English, this meant further exclusion for the native population. Additionally, the aforementioned Verwoerd wanted to enforce a regulation that half of the classes in secondary school were taught in Afrikaans.

This led to an outbreak of protest in Soweto, which provoked police violence, resulting in the death of 575 people (Federal Research Division Library of Congress 1996). Likewise, the investment for education for the native population was decreased. Furthermore, the government also emphasized the importance of cultural diversity, not for integration's sake, but to exclude the native population even more, as it was meant to prevent that the native population could easier adapt to the 'superior' Afrikaans or English culture.

All in all, it may be noted that the language policy regarding the language of instruction (LOI) was aimed to suppress the native indigenous population through teaching in the students' home-language. This meant that they could not attend secondary or higher education, as higher education was taught in English and Afrikaans, languages the native population insufficiently mastered. Also, financial support for the native schools was diminished to obstruct better education for the native population. Therefore, some parts of the current policy on the LOI may be described as strange as will be discussed in the next section.

## **5 South Africa's language and educational policies: the present and future**

Some of the key goals of the South African government's Language Policy for Higher Education regarding the current LOI are: the promotion of South African languages in higher education, jointly with English and Afrikaans; the development of strategies for acquiring proficiency in English; the promoting of studying South African literature and languages, and the encouragement of multilingualism (Department of Education 2002). This is very admirable but strange, because the Apartheid regime also encouraged multilingualism for segregation's sake.

Fortunately, the aim of the post-apartheid government with regard to the language policy is directed towards accessibility to language skills 'to ensure the right of individuals to realise their full potential to participate in and contribute to the social, cultural, intellectual, economic and political life of South African society (Department of Education 2002: 4). However, this policy causes friction because multilingualism has been responsible for obstructing native students to succeed in their scholarly career as the native students' proficiency level in English is insufficient to succeed in their school careers.

This is confirmed by the Ministry of Education as it admits that: “Language has been and continues to be a barrier to access and success in higher education” (Department of Education 2002: 4). Most public native schools adopt the South African vernacular languages in the first four years, the foundation years. Only after that period, the language of instruction is English, which causes that the students’ level of English stays behind in comparison to the white population’s English. The white public schools adopt mostly English as LOI from the start, although the language of instruction in some private schools is Afrikaans.

Higher education, such as universities, adopt mostly English as LOI, as stated by the South African government: “evidence suggests that the majority of universities and technikons<sup>4</sup> use English as the sole medium of instruction” (Department of Education 2002: 5). However, one of the most prestigious universities of South Africa, the Stellenbosch University, uses Afrikaans as LOI. Therefore, the policy on the language of instruction remains confusing, as each school can decide what language to adopt as the language of instruction.

This confusion, provoked by the Policy on Language of Instruction, is not the only point of discussion regarding English as LOI. South Africa is a country of eleven official languages. This may obstruct the learning of a second language, such as English, as English is not spoken at home as first language. However, it must be remarked that most natives are highly motivated to learn English as it is the gateway to higher education and consequently a better life.

Therefore, it is recommended that English should be the sole Language of Instruction on all school levels, as the learners will become familiar with the English language and not be obstructed by a low proficiency during their school career. This is confirmed by the Department of Education, recognizing that the teaching of English only occurs just the year before all classes are taught in English (grade 3). This has been responsible for a too low proficiency to perform on the required level (Department of Education 2009).

Furthermore, confusion is also provoked by the fact that some schools teach both in English and in native languages, as is required by the language policy. This duality gives rise to confusion among the learners, teachers and schools as the policy is not clear how to implement bilingualism. The result is a low quality of education in both languages. Thus, teaching solely in English is again recommended (Department of Education 2009).

A noble argument to teach in indigenous and native languages according to the language policy is the protection and development of these languages as well

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<sup>4</sup> South African institution, offering technical and vocational education on tertiary level.

as their people and their identities. It is also defended that literacy is stimulated through indigenous languages (Department of Education 2002). Unfortunately, there is a lack of books and teaching materials in these languages. This may also serve as argument to teach solely English at schools, because educational material is mostly provided in English. Furthermore, English is the language “in which students must master educational concepts, and provides a platform to participate and engage meaningfully in the information age on a global stage” (Department of Education 2009: 41).

It is also worth mentioning that English must be taught according to the level of the teachers’ proficiency (Department of Education 2002). Many of the native teachers do not have sufficient proficiency in English to teach in this language. This is due to a superficial training to teach in two languages. The result is that the classes are taught in an indigenous language. Thus, the consequence is that classes in English do not reach a sufficient level. This leads to a setback for native students in their education. Therefore, it is advised to direct more effort to teacher education regarding the teaching in English. (Department of Education 2009).

The future of the language policy in South Africa remains vague. The Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025 defends only that learners in Grades 1 to 6 have to undergo exams in the home language and the first additional language. This is mostly to determine the level of literacy rather than to test the proficiency level of the students. The mastering of a minimum language is another aim of this plan. However, it is not explained what this minimum language contains.

The Action Plan to 2014 schooling plan requires that schools should be transparent and effective and that schools are funded per learner’s level. Also is expressed that schools should be an inspiration for the student and the teachers. In addition, the fight against poverty and the improving of health and school frequency is emphasised. Unfortunately, nothing is stated about language policy or the poor condition of books, schools and overloaded classes. It is therefore recommended to add these issues to the ambitious 2025 plan.

## 6 Final remarks

It has been noted throughout this paper that South Africa is a mixed country concerning language, culture and history. The *Boer* culture as well as the native and indigenous cultures have left their marks on South Africa and South African English. This mixture of languages, history and cultures have made South Africa a very interesting and culturally rich country.

However, this mixture has aroused injustice, racism and poverty as the indigenous’ contribution to the South African culture has been much overlooked and

underestimated. This has led that the indigenous population has been discriminated and has been set back. The latest South African governments have made attempts to improve this situation through the official governmental recognition of the indigenous languages. Likewise, the recognition of the indigenous languages as language of instruction through language policies are attempts to improve the situation of the indigenous population.

All in all, it is concluded that the policy on the language of instruction remains vague and unclear. This situation results mostly in education in an indigenous language, which provokes that less native and indigenous students attend higher education, as their proficiency in English, the language of higher education, is insufficient. Thus, the desired multilingualism does not stimulate integration of the native and indigenous population, but contributes, unfortunately again, to segregation in education, as in the times of Apartheid.

Therefore, for integration's sake, the advice is to use English as the sole language of instruction. Furthermore, instead of unity through diversity as desired by the South African government, it would be more opportune to stimulate unity through one educational language. If English is applied as the sole language of instruction, the native population will have more chances to attain success on the educational ladder instead of being deprived of this. Likewise, the native and indigenous population will benefit from this, not only as it eases the way to higher education but through education the way will be eased to have more chances of a better life and escape poverty.

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