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African languages: A resource for South African education and nation

Of the eleven official languages recognized in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), nine are African (we shall not enter into the debate as to whether Afrikaans is an African language or not, save to communicate our view that it has the same constitutional status as the other languages). Further, the Constitution provides for the use and development of all official languages and in particular, the development of historically-disadvantaged indigenous languages. The Constitution states thus: “Recognizing 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” (Constitution 1996, Act 108). In its decision to have an African language (isiZulu) as a mandatory requirement for all students at the undergraduate level, the University of KwaZulu-Natal has made history in the language planning landscape. This is not surprising given the University’s vision to be a premier University of African scholarship. This laudable move is somewhat overdue given that it was in 2006 that the University’s Language Policy, advocating bilingualism with special reference to the development of isiZulu as the language of communication, medium of instruction and language of administration, was approved. Not only does the University identify with South Africa’s policies on multilingualism; it seeks to be a key player in their successful implementation.

It is important to touch briefly on the standard (one might even add, rehearsed) objection to the use of African languages for educational purposes, namely that such a move will impact

negatively on students' global competitiveness. An objection of this nature is fraught with historical and firmly entrenched colonial overtones which cannot be pursued here. For our purposes, it is sufficient to state that the development and use of isiZulu for instruction, administrative and other purposes at UKZN, is not aimed at replacing English. Rather, the intention is to facilitate access and foster social cohesion not only for the students and staff but the community at large—commensurate with one of the key pillars of the University's endeavours, community engagement—by tapping into the riches of indigenous African languages. Indeed, in isiZulu as in other African languages, the standard greeting, *sawubona*, is an expression of mutual recognition which is extended beyond the speakers to their families, their village, livestock, and everything to which they stand in relation. Failure, or blatant refusal, to learn others' languages in the context of numerous affordances and natural immersion (living in the midst of and in some cases being raised by the people who speak that language), is a deliberate act of non-recognition, a denial of the humanity of the other, while expecting one's own to be affirmed. Arguing against efforts to rectify this unfortunate historical state of affairs is even worse.

There is another, deeply psychological dimension accounting for African languages' failure to thrive, and that is the tendency by the African elite to denounce them in favour of European languages. To this end it is often argued that Africans themselves favour their children to be educated in English (or French for that matter) in order to maximise their employment opportunities. African languages are associated with ghetto education; and apartheid is often emotionally invoked. The language as a resource paradigm stresses the advantages of being multilingual. Multilingualism not only gives one access to different cultures and literatures but also allows one to compete for jobs in a much wider market. In countries such as Switzerland and Australia cultural and linguistic differences are cherished; they contribute to national strength. In a similar vein, in Australia the Japanese language is not seen as a problem; it is a resource that enables Australians to do business with Japan more successfully than other countries who do not have competency in the Japanese language. There is no harm in learning additional languages; instead, advantages accrue. Psycholinguists tend to favour retention of the home language of the learner while encouraging effective acquisition of additional languages (additive bilingualism). The teaching of African languages will follow suit: while learners will

remain firmly entrenched in their home languages, they will acquire additional linguistic resources to enable them to be more competent in their disciplines and professions. This should also increase their employment opportunities. This is more so in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, where approximately 80% of the population speaks isiZulu as their mother tongue, and even in the wider context of South Africa where 25% of the population are isiZulu speakers. In professional disciplines such as medicine, nursing, psychology, and education, to mention a few, graduates will be able to communicate with their clients and the national interest will be served. The same argument applies with the use of other African languages.

While the reasons for the preference for European languages are couched in economic terms, we consider them to be psychological, having to do with mental (de)colonization. It is not far-fetched to postulate that the first native to have come closest to the colonizer's ways of life and their attendant riches is the one who mastered their language and in so doing, establishing his (most likely, it was a man) status as a go-between (translator), between the colonizer and the colonized. Over a period of time an army of translators, positioned slightly above the 'illiterate' native but way below the master, would have grown. The speaking of a European language then became synonymous with superior intellect. To this day, this remains one of the key criteria by means of which some African parents assess their children's intellectual abilities (sadly, a number of African academics still perform this function even at university level in that they are employed as translators in projects led by others and are not trained or poised to make a meaningful intellectual contribution).

Let us hasten to mention that while linguistic ability is indeed a key component of intellectual functioning, this does not apply exclusively to the mastery of dominant European languages; so is competence in African and all the languages of the world. While it is true that European languages can and have been used for emancipatory purposes-- the emancipation of the African continent was spearheaded mainly by the Western-educated African elite working jointly with real and not imposed traditional African leadership-- what is often lost is that the vast majority of the African population is unable to access education through European languages and is consequently excluded from meaningful participation in a range of spheres including the

economic, social, and political. One wonders how many (would be) brilliant scientists, educationists, artists, etc. have been stillborn as a result. No country or continent can maintain a global competitive edge by educating its children, especially in their formative years, through a medium they can barely understand, let alone by an educator who also does not understand their language. The challenge is therefore on African intellectuals, working in tandem with like-minded intellectuals of all hues as well as the men and women of the village, the organic intellectuals, to free themselves from colonial bondage in order to perform the revolutionary task that intellectuals of other nations have done to their native languages, and that is to develop African languages as languages of scholarly discourse and technology. Being a premier University of African scholarship, UKZN is well-positioned and equal to this mammoth task.

It is for the reasons mentioned above amongst others that at UKZN African languages are considered a resource and not an impediment, to social, cultural, economic and other forms of development. Having branded itself as the premier university of African scholarship, it goes without saying that the University should take African languages, in this case isiZulu, on board as one of many steps to effect its vision and mission. We also believe that the intellectualization of African languages should take cognisance of the on-going developments in information and communication technology. Finally, without the development of African languages as envisaged in our Constitution, the ‘rainbow nation’ of which we are renowned as a country will always remain an elusive, utopian ideal. Like the proverbial *utalagu*, it will always escape our reach.

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